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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FICTIONALIZING THE AUDIENCE IN LITERARY NONFICTION: A STUDY OF THE ESSAYS OF ANNIE DILLARD AND LEWIS THOMAS

BY

BEVERLY MATIKO

(C)

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 1991

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saying, "We live in the midst of explosive devices; we are mined." He develops this metaphor further by claiming that "we will bomb, defoliate, blockade, seal off, and destroy all the tissues in the area" if we find ourselves in the least threatened (78). This process sometimes does us a great deal of harm, though, he asserts, and admits that "We are, in effect, at the mercy of our own Pentagons, most of the time" (80).

In addition to his use of metaphor in adding an unmistakable literariness to his essays as well in explaining concepts that otherwise might be quite difficult for the reader with a limited scientific background, Thomas frequently uses clever turns of phrase, largely, it would seem, for the sheer delight of playing with language. In one such example Thomas suggests that we do not sufficiently mourn our limited ability to access the wealth of information carried by individual odours as compared with other life forms. "We sometimes try to diminish our sense of loss (or loss of sense) by claiming to ourselves that we have put such primitive mechanisms behind us in our evolution," he says in "Vibes" (39). In another instance he demonstrates the pleasing results that can be achieved by occasionally and deliberately mixing levels of diction. He describes the development of a favourite spot, The Marine Biology Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts as "put together, given life, sustained into today's version of its

familiar "earnest proposal[s]." "Bring back the old attic," he suggests (140). It obviously is there for a purpose, he maintains, serving a useful biological function. The species needs to stash away, to forget, and from time to time to make inexplicable retrievals. Too much housekeeping, too much open access leads to what Thomas labels "one of the great errors of our time [which is] to think that by thinking about thinking, and then talking about it, we could possibly straighten out and tidy up our minds." We are in need of some re-minding here, Thomas seems to suggest:

> The human mind is not meant to be governed, certainly not by any book of rules yet written; it is supposed to run itself, and we are obliged to follow it along, trying to keep up with it as best we can. It is all very well to be aware of your awareness, even proud of it, but never try to operate it. You are not up to the job. (141)

Thomas's arguing for a new way in this essay actually amounts to arguing for a return to the old way, albeit for a new set of reasons. And in putting forward this particular argument in a lighthearted and entertaining way, aware as he most surely is of the limitations of any argument that proceeds largely by analogy, Thomas refuses to take himself too seriously. In one stroke he admits his own limitations while demonstrating that he is practising his own advice

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Dr. R. J. Merrett

Dr. M. R. Legris

Dr. H. W. Connor

Dr. J. A. Reither

Dr. K. Solez

Abstract

This exploration of the essay focuses on the literary nonfiction of contemporary American writers Annie Dillard and Lewis Thomas. It begins by discussing Georg Lukács and Virginia Woolf's commentary on the essay and also surveys the indebtedness and departures of subsequent writers who attempt to describe and define this genre.

The second chapter suggests that traditional approaches stressing the identification of one mode of discourse to the exclusion of others lead to an inadequate understanding of the essay. Offered instead is an examination of the essay based on Walter J. Ong's assertion that "the writer's audience is always a fiction." This concept of fictionalizing the audience is then applied to the essays of Dillard and Thomas to explain the encounter or transaction between writer and reader that the essay invites. This emphasis on audience, or, more specifically, on the fictional relationship between writer and reader encoded in the essay, is further presented as one of the primary ways by which the essay declares its literariness.

The titles of chapters two through five appropriate language from Dillard and Thomas to suggest some of the processes involved in the writer's fictionalization of the audience and the reader's subsequent identification and participation in that fictionalization. These include "choosing the given," "collaboration, accommodation, exchange and barter," and "obsessed with possibilities."

The essays receiving closest attention in this study are those found in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher, The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher, and Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. The dissertation concludes with a short essay in which the writer examines her own composition process.

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Chapter I

The Modern Essay and Its Audience: Travelling the Road to Independence in Good Company

Geoffrey H. Hartman, in Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today, expresses the following indebtedness: "I confess I am drawn strongly to Lukács's essay on the essay" (195). He is referring here to the first chapter of Georg Lukács's slim volume, itself a collection of essays, which has been translated into English as Soul and Form. It is not surprising to me that Hartman, in attempting the formidable task of making sense of "Literature Today," would feel compelled to turn to the essay, that literary form which possesses, to a greater extent than any other genre, the ability both to be literature and to be about literature.

This particular essay by Lukács, originally written in German from Florence in 1910, and cast as a letter to his friend Leo Popper, poses key questions about the genre of the essay, the most pertinent of which is, "To what extent have the really great writings which belong to this category been given literary form, and to what extent is this form of

theirs an independent one?" (1). When considered in conjunction with Virginia Woolf's "The Modern Essay," published twelve years later, it forms an appropriate starting point from which to begin a study of the modern essay as literature, a study which demonstrates the difficulties and perhaps even the impossibility of ever fully defining the essay. A survey of various attempts to define the essay will demonstrate some of the problems encountered in seeking an all-inclusive definition. It will also demonstrate a concession made by a number of writers--that a more productive study of the essay focuses on how an essay works rather than what an essay is. It is this group that I join and, in concentrating on what an essay does, I will pay particular attention to the relationships the essay calls into being between writer and reader. This leads to an examination of audience and its construction and suggests that it is in the identification and understanding of the dynamics involved in this process that the essay is best approached. The consideration of audience will be accomplished more specifically in subsequent chapters through an examination of the works of two contemporary American essayists, Annie Dillard and Lewis Thomas, both of whom simultaneously seek to establish and to extend the boundaries of this genre.

Turning first to the works of two theorists and practitioners of this genre, and specifically to their

essays on the essay, we notice that both Lukács and Woolf clearly view the essay as organic, as something living, evolving, adapting. Lukács's image of the essay stresses its dependence upon pre-existing matter; he pictures the essay as flourishing out of the compost of time and experience, noting that "it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive." It "always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at sometime in the past" (10).

Woolf too draws upon similar imagery, borrowing from both the biblical account of creation and the language of evolutionary biology in her discussion of the essay. She notes, for example, that "certain principles appear to control the chaos," and the rest of her essay seeks to identify and enumerate those principles (41). She repeatedly refers to the essay as "living," makes reference to its "family" which she describes as "widely spread," and praises its creator for being the "most sensitive of all plants to public opinion." She pictures the writer as being engaged in a Darwinian struggle. She observes that "The form, too, admits variety," and predicts that the essayist who succeeds will be the one who "adapts himself, and if he is good makes the best of the change, and if he is bad the worst" (41, 45). The essay's very survival is similarly described. Woolf notes its struggle to remain "pure from

dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter." She sees the essay as distilled literature in that it provides "no room for . . . impurities"; it must be "pure like water or pure like wine" (43). Clearly the essay to Woolf is neither a product of chance nor some incidental marginalia in the literary canon. She refuses to reduce it to a by-product generated in the creation of some greater form. She expresses little concern for the essay's ultimate origins, admitting that she does not particularly care "whether it derives from Socrates or Siranney the Persian." She concludes that, "like all living things, its present is more important than its past" (41).

Though it does not become a primary concern of either writer at this point, both Lukács and Woolf devote some space to a history of the evolution of the essay, an evolution that Lukács particularly stresses is on-going. "The essay form has not yet, today, travelled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago," he tells us, claiming that "the road of development [is marked by passage] from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art" (13). In its evolution to date, he observes, it has exceeded the bounds of utility, of simply being a tool, an instrument of analysis. According to Lukács, no longer must it "always have to speak of books or poets . . . . [nor] be the simple exposition or explanation of a work"; rather, it has become "too rich and

independent for dedicated service." This broadening of the essay's mandate, however, raises new problems. No longer can the essay be restricted to these categories, Lukács explains, because "it stands too high, it sees and connects too many things." It resists rigidity or uniformity by being "too intellectual and too multiform to acquire a form out of its own self" (15).

Woolf also notes that the essay has demanded a wide latitude in size, style, and subject matter. It "can be short or long," she observes, "serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside" (41). She agrees with Lukács that the essay should be viewed no longer as simply a tool for the transference of information, but she does not discount the well-written essay's ability "[to blow] more knowledge into us . . . than the innumerable chapters of a hundred text-books" (42). While no longer being concerned primarily with "exhortation, information, and denunciation," in its modernization, she observes, it has lost some of "its size and something of its sonority" (46, 45). Though notably less committed to Marxist imagery than Lukács in her explanation of how these shifts have occurred, Woolf does cite the force of the marketplace and the changes in its readership's status and attitudes as being responsible for some of the changes in the essay. She finds, for example, that "the Victorian essayists . . . . wrote at greater length than is now usual, and they wrote

for a public which had not only time to sit down to its magazine seriously, but a high, if peculiarly Victorian, standard of culture by which to judge it" (45). She notes too a change in the perspective of the essayist, moving from what she labels a "private essayist" to a "public [essayist]," effecting a shift "from the drawing-room to the Albert Hall" (49).

Both writers concur that one quality--a sense of durability or timelessness--characterizes the essay. The essay for Lukács excludes all strictly "critical writings which, like a hypothesis in natural science, like a design for a machine part, lose all their value at the precise moment when a new and better one becomes available" (2). Woolf eliminates various types of nonfictional prose from her conception of the essay as well when she asserts that "Literal truth-telling and finding fault with a culprit for his good are out of place in an essay. . . ." Most letters, reviews, editorials, or other forms of journalistic writing do not strictly qualify as essays in Woolf's estimation because they violate her dictum that "everything should be for our good and rather for eternity than for the March number of the Fortnightly Review" (42). She agrees with Lukács in his assertion that one of the characteristics of an essay is its ability to invite return. For Woolf the essay possesses what might be called a sense of compelling elusiveness: "You have not finished with it because you

have read it, any more than friendship is ended because it is time to part," she observes. "Life wells up and alters and adds. Even things in a bookcase change if they are alive; we find ourselves wanting to meet them again; we find them altered" (47). Such writing is difficult, if not impossible, for the writer Woolf calls "the habitual essayist" who is forced to "skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of personality," who offers readers "a worn weekly halfpenny instead of a solid sovereign once a year" (48).

Other distinctions Lukács and Woolf draw between the essay and other forms of literature relate both to the presence of a controlling idea (now most frequently referred to as a "thesis," though neither Woolf nor Anna Bostock, Lukács's translator, find it necessary to use this term), and to the attention given to the creative process which traditionally has not been foregrounded to the same extent in other genres.[1]

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[1] Of course I am not overlooking such landmarks as Shakespeare's sonnets or Sterne's novels which delightfully and repeatedly play with the question "What am I?" while also exploring how they came to be. Indeed, as John Mowitt has reminded us, "Since Tristram Shandy we are no longer surprised when 'novels' split into instances of generic self-reflection" (275). However, such works remain the

The closest Woolf comes in her essay to defining a thesis occurs in her frequently quoted statement, "the art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea."[2] Once again we see her reliance on the organic as a source of metaphor to explain written discourse. She locates the centre of the body, or the core, from which all other members radiate with symmetry and balance as her

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exception, at least until the twentieth century, when an increasing number of writers choose to draw attention to the creative process at work, to the choices that they are continually making, as well as those which they are rejecting. The essayist, it can be argued, has rarely pretended do be doing otherwise. "What I offer here are but my fancies," Montaigne admits, "by which I do not try to give knowledge of things, but of myself . . . ("Of Books," II, 16).

[2] p. 50. I first came across this statement years ago in John R. Trimble's immensely refreshing and extremely teachable writing text, Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975). Trimble uses the statement as an epigraph to his third chapter, "How to write a critical analysis," and lest Woolf prove too prosaic for the more pragmatic reader, Trimble balances her advice against Sloan Wilson's--"A writer's job is sticking his neck out."

metaphor for thesis, main idea, or major focus. She pronounces the successful essayist, in this particular case Walter Pater, as one who "has somehow contrived to get his material fused" (43).

This idea of centering, focusing, or fusing is mentioned elsewhere in her essay with reference to other writers as well. In describing the experience offered to readers by the essay, she says, "we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused." The pairing of "soar" and "plunge" against the more lethargic "rouse" initially seems contradictory. How is it possible, the reader may well ask, to either soar or plunge without somewhere in the process being roused? This can best be explained, I think, by reading further in her essay where we encounter two more metaphors for the essay. "The essay must lap us about," Woolf maintains, "and draw its curtain across the world" (41). In this sentence, the verb "lap" works several ways. It suggests on one level enclosing, confining, and covering. On another level, however, and especially considering that it directly follows "plunge," the association with water and waves is inescapable. The essay not only covers, confines, enfolds, encloses, but it laps up against the reader, working rhythmically, defining its own space, perhaps even lulling the reader, but constantly bumping up against her space as well. The spell is broken if the reader is jolted

out of that space, or "roused." The breaking of the fiction--the removal of the reader from the realm mutually created by writer and reader--constitutes the interrupting, the rousing that spoils the illusion of the shared experience. In order to protect the reader from being roused, Woolf advises the writer to ensure that in his prose "not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture" (42).

Despite this close attention to physical crafting, there remains something both illusory and intimate about the essay. Woolf insists that it "lay[s] us under a spell with its first word." It has the power to alter the reader, to take him through many stages, including "amusement, surprise, interest, indignation." In so doing the experience offered by the essay is not unlike the experience of a dream--in this particular instance a good dream---for the reader/dreamer, we are told, eventually wakes "refreshed."[3] She develops this image up to a point, but then begins to dismantle it, suggesting by the next paragraph that this "trance . . . is not sleep but rather an

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[3] This image of the essay as a retreat from reality is taken up again in the end of Woolf's essay where, instead of picturing the readers in a drawing room, she has us comfortably settled in the boudoir. The essay has fulfilled its function, she maintains, by "drawing its curtain around us" and by "[shutting] us in, not out" (50).

intensification of life--a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure" (41).

It is at this point in her essay that Woolf most clearly demonstrates her concern with the relationship between the writer and reader; it is also where by extension she raises the issue of audience and the importance to the writer of taking it into consideration. She praises the writer who is "careful of our pleasure," noting that "Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end" (45, 41), here prefiguring Roland Barthes and one of the properties of the text which he identifies and celebrates.[4] She acknowledges that considering the audience has resulted in basic changes in the essay's size as well as style, that the essayist who had been writing for "a small audience of cultivated people" now found himself addressing "a larger audience of people who were not quite so cultivated" (45). And she sympathizes with the essayist for the changing

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[4] Le Plaisir du Texte (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973) and its English translation by Richard Miller, The Pleasure of the Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), deal most fully with this idea, though Barthes returns to it in Roland Barthes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) in his discussion of "Le frisson du sense" ("The Thrill of Meaning") and "Le paradoxe comme jouissance" ("Paradox as pleasure").

demands placed upon him as he now addresses a readership composed of "busy people catching trains in the morning or . . . tired people coming home in the evening" (48).

In her previously mentioned assertion that "the art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea," and in her reference to this driving force "compelling words to its shape" (50), Woolf touches upon what for Lukács becomes a major preoccupation--the primacy of form. It is not possible to talk about Lukács's notions of form, however, without considering the process by which that form becomes recognizable.

This brings us back to the initial question Lukács raises about the essay's form: "To what extent have the really great writings which belong to this category been given literary form, and to what extent is this form of theirs an independent one?" Lukács vigorously maintains that "the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigour of a law, from all other art forms" (2), but he is less successful at isolating that form than we might wish. Woolf's metaphor of the skeleton inextricably links form and content. Identify the "backbone," she suggests, and you will have apprehended the form. Lukács's definition and the process it describes, however, surprisingly approach the metaphysical, if not actually the mystical. The closest he actually comes to defining form is when he asserts that form is that which "defines the limits of the immaterial" (7). A

mysterious process takes place, he suggests, at that point where the essay becomes art.

He makes this observation in a discussion of the essay's place in art and science, a discussion that begins with the question, "To what extent do the standpoint of such a work and the form given to this standpoint lift it out of the sphere of science and place it at the side of the arts, yet without blurring the frontiers of either?" (1). In attempting to answer this question later on, he asserts that "Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies" (3). Here he moves in the direction of identifying another of the essay's distinguishing features--its unfailing commitment to accomplishing both of these aims, offering us facts and souls, relationships and destinies, yet without allowing one to eclipse the other.

All of this discussion does not bring us much closer to a description of the essay's form per se. Lukács describes the moment of metamorphosis when the essay ceases to be science and becomes art as occurring when "something has dissolved all its content in form" (3). Rather than stressing dissolution, a more accurate view of the process that calls an essay into being might better describe the creation and maintenance of a dynamic tension that elevates the essay above the merely didactic or informative work. It

is this tension that sets the essay apart--a tension created by being about something other than itself (its content or what Lukács calls its "starting-point" or "springboard"), while still being about itself. This is not to suggest that the essay lags behind its sister literary arts, the poem and the novel, who for some time now quite comfortably have claimed to be about themselves. The essay points back to its referents--be they Montaigne's three ghostly imposters, E. B. White's lake in Maine, or Dillard's prometheus moth--and transforms those things or, more strictly speaking, both the writer and the reader's perception of those things. It accomplishes this transformation while both commenting upon itself and refusing to surrender its outside focus, its factual or experiential base.

We might envision the essay's form as the embodiment of a Janus-like figure whose backward-looking face focuses on its referent, its subject or content, while the forward-looking face remains intent on discerning and defining the best manner in which to encode these perceptions.[5] While Lukács maintains that the "concrete experience which has led

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[5] Graham Good also uses this classical image in speaking of the essay, but he uses it to describe what he calls "likeness," the ability by which the creator is able at once to represent in his creation not only his model but himself as well (21).

up to these questions is lost in an infinite distance" (4 emphasis mine), I think it is more accurate to suggest that it is transformed in an infinite distance--that distance being a product of time (its alterations and recasting), language (and its ability, at best, to approximate or represent experience), and the constant creation and superimposition of new experience (for at least since Heraclitus's observation, it has been impossible for any of us to step in the same river twice).

Both Lukács and Woolf have provided valuable points of departure for looking at the essay and some of the questions this genre raises. They both attempt to define the essay in terms of metaphor, seeking images that will adequately represent the essay as something alive, adaptable, and yet timeless. They stress the variety of the essay, noting how it is able to accommodate not only numerous topics but various modes of discourse and rhetorical purposes as well. Both writers address questions of form and epistemology, too, seeking not only to understand how the essay comes to be but how readers and writers come to knowledge through it. They address the relationship of essayist to essay--referred to often in terms of personality--as well as issues of exposition and exploration, the reader's role in the entire enterprise, and, in general, the multi-facettedness of the essay, that genre that Richard Chadbourne has more recently labelled "an exasperatingly hybrid and amorphous literary

form" (133).

Before beginning an examination of the collected works of two specific essayists, however, it would be well, I think, to review some of the observations of writers at both ends of this century who have both practised and critiqued this genre, many of whom are actually responding either directly to Lukács and Woolf or at least to some of the issues that they raise. While an exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this particular project, a survey of the range of opinions on the issues listed above will provide useful topical grounding in the genre and will contribute toward establishing the centrality of the audience in any full consideration of the essay--a centrality that I believe has not yet been fully recognized nor systematically applied to a body of existing essays.

Returning once again to the question of definition, we find some writers who are willing to struggle with codifying this genre and others who simply throw up their hands in surrender and decide finally to be content in the enjoyment of that which they can never hope to adequately explain. J. B. Priestley decides that "the term 'essay' is so elastic that it means nothing," and he offers, with tongue in cheek, I am sure, the most self-evident of definitions: "The simplest and safest definition of the essay is that it is the kind of composition produced by an essayist" (7). Alfred Kazin likewise admits his inability to define the

essay. Even though he has been publishing them for thirty years, "I will confess," he says, "that I do not know what the function of 'piece' or 'essay' is" (vii).

Carl Van Doren returns to the organic metaphor in order to explain the essay, but he extends it to such lengths that the reader is in danger of becoming mired down in it. He describes the essayist as one whose "knowledge or opinions must have lain long enough inside him to have taken root there," and adds that "when they come away they must bring some of the soil clinging to them." This bushel of knowledge or basket of opinions once harvested, presumably, comes away "shaped by that soil--as plants are which grow in cellars, on housetops, on hillsides, in the wide fields, under shade in forests" (451). (Here the reader and perhaps even Van Doren himself might do well to follow the advice of Irish folk singer Christy Moore: "Don't forget your shovel if you want to go to work!")

T. W. Adorno abandons the organic metaphor in favour of one drawn from textiles. (Appropriate, perhaps, considering that he is dealing with properties of the text?) He finds that

> In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a single carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the

density of this texture. (160)

Before concluding his discussion, he raises another interesting though more abstract image for the essay. With reference to the many and often disparate elements that are able to combine in the essay, Adorno observes that this genre "erects no scaffolding, no edifice. Through their own movement the elements crystallize into a configuration. It is a force field. . . ."[6]

More typical are the descriptive definitions, such as Caleb Winchester's and Essie Chamberlain's, which are repeated with some alteration in scores of rhetoric and composition handbooks. Winchester defines an essay as "a prose composition of moderate length, dealing with one subject, and in such a way as to give free expression to the personality of the writer" (vii); and Chamberlain, writing several decades later, remains content to repeat essentially verbatim the former definition.[7]

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[6] p. 161. One of the most complete catalogues of metaphors for the essay that I have found is assembled by Graham Good in The Observing Self. Good's study includes references to the essay as carpet, coin, constellation, conversation, fruit, illumination, medicine, music, portrait, and ventriloquy.

[7] In the introduction to the anthology Essays Old and New, she defines the essay as "a brief prose composition

David Daiches expands his definition of the essay to take into consideration Kenneth Burke's emphasis on the various components of the communication triangle. He describes the essay as

> a reasonably short prose discussion in which the personality of the author in some degree shapes the style and tone of the argument, and in which the writer's skill in the handling of prose exposition is impressive in its own right and pleasing for the reader to watch in operation. (5)

Within the matter of a few pages, Daiches's definition has grown even further. In his introduction to a collection of essayists, he announces:

> Here are intelligent and civilized men using the medium of English prose in order to set ideas happily in a context of human awareness. The ideas may be deliberately trivial or preposterous, or they may be profound and challenging, or they may lie anywhere between these extremes. But in each case the author conveys them in appropriate language, organizes them deftly, and presents them in such a way that we can take some delight in the

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which treats of one subject in such a way as to give free expression to the personality of the writer" (xxi-xxii).

> presentation at the same time we respond as intelligent and thoughtful readers to the implications of what is said. (7-8)

Chadbourne seeks to address some of the more recent objections that have been raised to the traditional definitions of the essay by providing what he calls a "composite picture":

> The essay is a brief, highly polished piece of prose that is often poetic, often marked by an artful disorder in its composition, and that is both fragmentary and complete in itself, capable both of standing on its own and forming a kind of "higher organism" when assembled with other essays by its author. Like most poems or short stories it should be readable in a single sitting; readable but not entirely understandable the first or even the second time, and readable more or less forever . . . . [unlike] the enormous number of "non-literary" essays which we throw away after removing their contents, like the wrappers of meat-packages. (149)

Though his definition takes into account some of the contradictions that even the most cursory reading in the genre reveals (that the language of the essay rises above the utilitarian, that the reader confronts unexpected juxtapositioning, that the essay can be both complete and yet

contribute to a larger corporate identity, that it can be dealt with in one sitting and yet invite return), Chadbourne still echoes much of Lukács and Woolf, particularly in his references to the essay as organism and as object worth saving.

Joseph Epstein combines elements of several of the previously cited definitions: "I hold the essay to be a piece of writing that is anywhere from three to fifty pages long," he says, "that can be read twice, that provides some of the pleasure of style, and that leaves the impression of a strong or at least interesting character" (28).

In his immensely readable and helpful essay called "Essayists on the Essay," Carl H. Klaus concludes that, in trying to define the essay, many writers resort to doing so in opposition to other forms of writing, "invoking images and metaphors suggestive of the essay's naturalness, openness, or looseness as opposed to the methodicality, regularity, and strictly ordered quality of conventional prose discourse" (156). Joel Haefner finds this duality particularly suspect. He sets this observation within a discussion of a number of problems raised by traditional definitions of this genre--a discussion to which I will return later in this chapter.

Part of the difficulty with defining the essay arises when one builds a definition, either intentionally or unintentionally, upon what the essay is not. Although the

degree to which they frame their definitions in this (dis)respect varies, many writers insist that we come to recognize the essay through a process of elimination: the essay is not poetry, it is not fiction, it is certainly not too long, and so forth. Reda Bensmaïa admits that one of the challenges facing anyone working with the essay is to write about it "without having to resort to negative concepts; incompletion, inexhaustivity, illimitability, indecidability, etc." (91). Both Robert Atwan and Chris Anderson raise this concern as well. Atwan succinctly points out the problem with the term "nonfiction" which is frequently used in discussions of the essay. It is a "nonword," he says. Anderson notes that "it's a negative term for something positive, implying that somehow nonfiction is less than fiction" (x, ix). Chadbourne too objects to the term "nonfiction": "Abused in this way, the poor essay is saddled not only with vagueness but also with negativity" (133).

With respect to defining the essay in terms of what it is, what it is not, and to whom it may be related, many writers raise the question of other genres and attempt to trace the blood lines that connect essay with poem, short story, novel, and many other forms. Other writers simply admit, as does Haefner, that the genre of essay embodies a great deal, that it "encompasses, uses, exploits, and replies to a multiplicity of other genres" (265).

A partial list of what has come under the rubric of essay includes anecdotes, autobiographies, celebrity profiles, columns (which Atwan aptly describes as "those 750-word rectangles"), critical studies, dialogues, diatribes, epigrams, fantasies, geometrical demonstrations, historical or biographical monographs, interviews, journals, literary criticism, meditations, memoirs, philosophical treatises, political commentaries, reportage, reviews, rumination, scholarly articles, scientific papers, sermons, snippets of humour, travel writing, and unsigned newspaper articles.[8]

Adjectives are often employed as well to further carve up, package, and serve the essay. They have been used, and it has been argued abused, by compilers of essays, by writers of composition texts, and by their well-meaning serfs--the composition teachers--who, zealous in their attempts to offer students many different venues for writing, unwittingly find themselves prescribing the essay that isn't one. Such divisions often include a listing or variation of the modes of discourse. Generations of composition textbooks remind us that these categories--narrative, expository, asrgumentative, and descriptive--have been keeping company for a long time. The problem with such

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[8] This list is a compilation of categories mentioned by Atwan, Bensmaïa, Haefner, Lopate, Van Doren, and Winchester.

classifications becomes apparent when we try to apply them to what recognized essayists actually do. Any given essay is apt to reveal a combination of those modes, and, while one may be seen to predominate, we would be hard pressed to find any practising essayists who actually compose with these terms in mind. At best, the modes furnish us with a cursory reminder of some of the things that can be accomplished within the boundaries of the essay. We would do well to reflect on Daiches's pronouncement on this subject: "one sets up distinctions between different kinds of essays in order to break them down again."[9]

Related to this question of classifying essays is the controversy surrounding membership in the club. Just what should be allowed in and what should not? There seems to be general agreement that pieces that do not invite a return, pieces which are more likely to be tossed than treasured (or at least treated with some combination of physical, philosophical, and philological care) are best considered as something other than essays. In his introduction to The Best American Essays 1986, Atwan remarks that "essays appear

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[9] p. 7. For a study of the problems with prescriptive use of modes in composition and the resultant paradigm shift, see Robert J. Connors, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," College Composition and Communication 32.4 (1981): 444-55.

every year that transcend the daily newspaper and the monthly magazine. For various reasons of craft, or insight, or feeling, these essays leave a permanent impression." He singles out particular essayists whose works have achieved this status and says that their essays "become--as did E.B. White's essays in the forties, James Baldwin's in the fifties, Joan Didion's in the sixties, and Annie Dillard's in the seventies--a vital part of contemporary literature. They deserve to be collected," he concludes, "to be read again and again" (xi).

Klaus's investigations reinforce the distinction between the timely and the timeless that often separates the essay from the article. He also observes that the former is characterized by a "personal orientation" and the latter a "factual orientation" (161). Corbett is in agreement here, distinguishing the essay from other types of nonfiction (in which he includes the "article," the "think piece," the "feature article," and the "critical article") by pointing out that in the latter group the author "strives to keep himself out of his work" (xviii-xix). Priestley draws these same divisions, noting that in the essay "every phrase is salted with personality" (9). He finds de Quincey's categories of Literature of Knowledge and Literature of Power useful and assigns essays to the latter group, noting that "we are indifferent to [the essayist's] subject. It is he and not his subject that engages us" (8). While I think

it is overstating it to suggest that as readers we are "indifferent" to the writer's subject, I would grant that the appeal exerted there is certainly secondary; what is more compelling is that apparently more personal aspect, call it personality ("real" or assumed, actual or fictitious), style, or craft. Despite the problematic pronouncement "good," in this instance I am basically in agreement with Van Doren: "What matters is the manner. If he has good matter, he may write a good essay; if he has a good manner he probably will write a good essay" (451). It is what the writer does with his subject that is most engaging, that fusing of writer and subject that reaches out to include and not simply inform the reader.

I suspect that the discussion is far from over with regards to the essay's boundaries, but practically speaking we cannot ignore the truce that seems to have been negotiated by other genres. They have all learned to deal with those forms of writing which share some loose similarities with them and which, most often outside of the discussions by the specialists, are used synonymously with them. Few worry that the recipient of a Hallmark greeting card, for example, might remark after reading the enclosed pre-printed sentiments, "What a lovely little poem." And it never occurred to me to question my mother's use of literary labels when she enclosed the following note in a package mailed to a book club recently: "I am returning these books

because I did not order them and I am not a reader of Harlequin novels" (emphasis her daughter's). Those who study what happens on the stage and in texts produced with the stage in mind have learned to share their label with bodies such as the Emmys who yearly make pronouncements which include "this year's best television drama." Art largely has come to tolerate and in many instances appreciate and incorporate popular culture, yet it is likely that those who remain somewhat uneasy about such cohabitation will continue to belabour distinctions.

Adorno touches upon the distinction between the essay and the article or specialized scholarly work by way of a reference to Max Bense's work.[10] What is particularly interesting is not so much this distinction, but the discussion of process that it raises:

> Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a scientific treatise. He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what

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[10] Adorno provides the following citation: "Uber den Essay und Seine Prosa," Merkur 1.3 (1947): 418.

> the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing. (165)

Such discussions inevitably refer to Montaigne's choice of term for his collection, _essais_, and the process that very word by definition seems to suggest. Epstein contends that "A certain modesty of intention resides in the essay," and he links this to his understanding of the term: "to try, to attempt, to taste, to try on, to assay" (28). Inherent in the term is the notion of process. In speaking of what he calls "process fiction," Keith Fort notes that upon encountering it, readers "sense that we are in the presence of fallible minds moving towards uncertain ends. The formal satisfaction that we obtain from reading such works comes close to being the pleasure of participating with another mind in exploration" (637). Though he is speaking particularly of the reader's experience with the novel here, Fort does so in the context of arguing for greater freedom in form in critical writing. Certainly this freedom is one that the essayist, at least since Montaigne, has taken for granted and the reader has accepted with gratitude. "The essayist," Smith reminds us, is someone who "gives you his thoughts, and lets you know, in addition, how he came by them" (120). He is someone who presents us with, according to Chadbourne, "a unique vehicle of 'thought,' of the pondering of experience" (150).

General observations such as Winchester's "the plan of

his essay . . . seems to shape itself while he is writing" have led some to conclude that the essay is essentially formless, a random collection of impressions, observations, and projections. It would be more accurate, rather, to suggest that what the essay actually presents and preserves is apparent formlessness. This seems to be the perception of Epstein when he says that "The formlessness of this very old form is part of its pleasure" (27). Others who have studied the essay closely tend to agree that it does indeed possess form, even though that form may be the "most protean and elusive of literary forms" (Chadbourne 134). Klaus is quick to defend the essay as anything but "a free-for-all form of writing," noting that what is characteristic is not the absence of form but rather "freedom from conventionalized form and thought" and its own particular "artful artlessness" (166, 168). He admits that the notion of freedom does figure prominently in discussions of the essay, but is quick to define that freedom as "independence from the strictures and structures that govern other forms of discourse" (160). Corbett concedes that the essay is characterized by "its apparent ease and casualness," but adds that it "is still tightly controlled and deliberately structured by the writer" (xxi).

Kurt Spellmeyer traces this notion of apparent formlessness back to Montaigne, and claims that it has become part of the convention of the essay. He sees this

convention as "literally con-vention, a 'coming together' of dissonant perspectives," and adds that "the form of the essay nonetheless demands a self-conscious formlessness, a con-vention through contravention" (263).

Zeiger stresses that what the essay presents us with is not formlessness but a form other than that traditionally adopted in argumentative or scholarly discourse. "The scene and scope of the familiar essay is not logic," he asserts, "but intuition; not the rational order of left-brained, linear, sequential procedure, but the free association of right-brained, holistic, simultaneous play of alternatives." He restates this by affirming, "It is not the writer's reasoning which governs the familiar essay, but the writer's personality." This "quality of accommodating several viewpoints, even contradictory viewpoints, simultaneously" is one that Zeiger finds most frequently in what he labels "the familiar essay." He compares it with conversation in that it "rambles easily--not really randomly--over a variety of related thoughts. It 'proves' an idea in the sense of testing and turning it; and thus it readily embraces contrasting alternatives (460-61)."[11]

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[11] Thomas J. Farrell has developed a convincing and workable model of various rhetorical strategies which may well have some bearing on a general understanding of the essay's form. Zeiger's description of what characterizes the familiar essay sounds very much like what Farrell calls

Though the essay is frequently referred to as an "open form," Adorno is quick to argue that such a designation tells only part of its creative history. He finds that it is open "through its inner nature, [in that] it negates anything systematic and satisfies itself all the better the more strictly it excludes the systematic," but it is more closed "in that it labors emphatically on the form of its presentation . . . . [and in] that respect alone," he concludes, "the essay resembles art" (165).

At times the essay's form is announced by the thesis statement which traditionally has been viewed as the core of the essay. One of the common thesis patterns offered to students in writing classes, the three-pronged thesis, is praised for the way it serves the readers and demonstrates a writer who is taking his audience into consideration. Such a thesis alerts the readers to the major sections of the paper and the order in which they will occur, as in the following: "Competitive sports should be encouraged on the collegiate level because they foster school spirit, provide an arena for achieving shared goals, and contribute to each participant's physical fitness."

Clearly, such a thesis has the unmistakable sound of a student writer, albeit a student writer who may have

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female modes of rhetoric in "The Female and Male Modes of Rhetoric," College English 40.8 (April 1979): 909-21.

received some tutoring on parallel structure and the ordering of elements in an argument. When we look at the work of practising, published essayists, however, we find that the thesis--long assumed to be a basic and to some a sacred component of the essay--is not always as easily identifiable or as neatly patterned as we might expect. Indeed, we may not be able to find a thesis at all, or we may find that the essay goes so far as to negate its starting premise.

Phillip Lopate asserts that "The essayist must be willing to contradict himself . . . to digress, and even to end up in an opposite place from where he started" (47). Such strategy hardly seems compatible with proving a thesis in the traditional rhetorical sense. Klaus suggests we have been in error trying to saddle the essay with the notion of thesis, reminding us that for Montaigne, "the essay is neither a mode of proof, nor of persuasion, but of inquiry" (157). He also finds that contemporary essayists neither think nor compose in terms of prefabricated theses. He says that instead they "tend to see the meaning of an essay as residing not so much in any particular idea or point that it happens to affirm, as in its display of a mind engaging ideas" (169).

Anderson, in an article that aptly reevaluates "hearsay" surrounding the essay, finds that the essay, unlike the article, "doesn't 'prove' a thesis." He is quick

to add, however, that the essay does indeed possess a thesis. "It has a point," he says, "and one that all of us can get." He goes on to suggest that this may be why the essay is so often regarded as a second class citizen, "since in American literature opaqueness is the source of literary and philosophical prestige" (306).

Kazin would argue, on the contrary, that the essay does possess a certain opacity, and therein lies much of its appeal. He describes the product resulting from the writer's commitment to both his subject and the process of discovery. "The more deeply committed the writer is to his subject," Kazin explains, "the more he puts himself into relationship with it." And when this happens "there will appear to his mind, as he writes, what one can only call the hidden issue, the deeper issue, the unexpected issue pressing for our awareness--the issue that really becomes one to the individual writing the essay" (viii).

With the suggestion of the essay and opacity, the work of two particular critics who put the essay through the paces of modern theory comes to mind. I refer here to Joel Haefner who, in conjunction with editing a recent issue of Prose Studies devoted solely to the essay, has wrestled with "Unfathering the Essay," and to John Mowitt who, in the same journal, looks at "The Essay as Instance of the Social Character of Private Experience."

Haefner urges a reevaluation of what he finds has been

"accepted prima facie as a 'law' of the essay that there is direct referentiality between the essay and the essayist." He reminds us that "Such an equation between writer and text carries with it, like a strip of fly-paper, a host of traces, premises, ideologies." He finds the traditional link between writer and text to be "[d]eceptively simple in its metonymic purity" and goes on to urge the dismantling of patriarchal assumptions surrounding the essay. He sums this up most clearly when he says,

> To assume that an essay can be "fathered," that an essay is the sincere and true expression of two types, the personal and the ratiocinative, is to claim the essay genre as the product of patriarchal, aristocratic, individualistic culture. Under this theory, the essay takes its place as property and patrimony: it becomes largely male discourse, a discourse of leisure, a discourse based on dialectics and teleology. (259)

Haefner claims that "the paradigm of essay equals essayist" has existed at least since the publication of Montaigne's Essais in 1580, and that with the subsequent publication of Bacon's essays in England shortly thereafter, future essays came to be aligned with one or the other of these essayists. He describes the inevitable result of accepting "essay equals essayist" as the adoption of a "dualistic fathering

theory." The essay "fell prey," he says, "to a sort of ad hominem theory and was viewed as either the offspring of Bacon or Montaigne," hence the notion of fathering. The work of those who were found to trace their literary lineage back to Montaigne was described as "personal, familiar, solipsistic, associational, reflective, anecdotal, unorganized, spontaneous, and meditative," while those perceived as having been raised in Bacon's shadow produced work regarded as "objective, impersonal, concerned with great social and moral issues, rational, authoritative, methodical, balanced, and argumentative." What we have here, Haefner contends, is "male ritualistic combat figured out in a theory of literary form [with] two diametric personalities in conflict" (260-63).

Mowitt approaches the essay with the underlying assumption that "the personal is political . . . that subjectivity is intrinsically organized by its public forms of expression and is therefore no less historical than those very forms." In this way he too is calling into question the traditional notion of what the "personal" means in the essay and the relationship between the writer and subject as well. He explores Montaigne's claims that his essays are revelations of the self and suggests that what is actually happening is that "they appear to him as determining instances of subjectivity because of the relation to a social dynamic that both exceeds and enables them." This

does not totally invalidate Montaigne's claims about his own work, however; rather, Mowitt is quick to add, "that they appear to him as such really does inform the way he experiences himself" (274). Put very elementarily, Mowitt is addressing the question of whether Montaigne creates the essays or the essays create Montaigne. He concludes that to view the process of creation as a dichotomy is unnecessarily and deceptively limiting. Each creates, Mowitt contends, and each is created. Mowitt takes this a step further and suggests that the essay creates the subject and the subject creates the essay. He concludes that "Seen from this perspective, an analysis of the essay becomes a component of a more general inquiry into the discursive history of modernity" (276).

Where does this leave us then? Can we in any meaningful and critically responsible way speak of the essay in terms of its characteristics, its form, its subject, its author, its audience? Is there anything left to nurture or unearth with the aid of traditional literary tools, or is hi-tech sowing ("so?"ing) and harvesting now the only legitimate approach?

I think the answer is suggested by the essay itself. If it is indeed, as Elizabeth Hardwick has recently asserted, "nothing less than the reflection of all there is: art, personal experience, places, literature, portraiture, politics, science, music, eduction--and just thought itself

in orbit," then surely we do the genre a disservice by crafting one little box from/in which to (un)pack it.

If the essay is created, as has been suggested, by viewing an object or experience (call it what you will) from several angles and perhaps even simultaneously, by turning it over, testing its texture, probing its surfaces, reaching into its gaps, and even stepping inside and viewing it from the inside out, then surely the essay will be able to withstand similar pluralistic probing here. For whatever we may say about the essay, few would actually challenge Atwan's assertion that the essay is one "gutsy form" (ix, 1987). It withstands comparison with other genres and yet stands on its own. It creates its own terms by which to be evaluated, yet does so without disowning its literary relations. In choosing this route, the essay travels the road to independence in good company.

Chapter II

All Work and Noticeable Play: Fictionalizing the Audience in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

When essays have been approached in the easy chair, the classroom, or the literary scholar's study, attention traditionally has been paid to their subject matter, tone and style, organization, persuasiveness, and informativeness. Even the most casual reading motivated by nothing more than curiosity or some needed distraction in a dentist's waiting room will usually enable a reader to comment on what has been read in those terms. Less obvious, but perhaps even more crucial to a successful encounter or transaction between writer and reader is an accurate understanding of the assumptions and demands that the writer is making of the reader as his audience.

The term "audience" becomes at once problematic when used in discussions of reading and writing. Douglas B. Park explores both the value and the limitations of the term as it is used in these contexts. He reminds us that

> the basic image from which the concept of audience derives is that of a speaker addressing a group of people in some fairly well defined political, legal, or ceremonial situation. The group of people, the audience, listens intently because they have some specific involvement in the

> situation. They have a part to play. The speech shapes itself around the fact of their presence and their involvement.

In a reading situation, however, no one typically is speaking. Neither is anyone listening. Granted, something like speaking and listening may well be taking place, but just where the similarities begin and end remains uncertain.

Park would have us consider the term "audience" as a metaphor. He finds that

> "audience" really uses a very concrete image to evoke a much more abstract and dynamic concept. Whether we mean by "audience" primarily something in the text, or something outside it, "audience" essentially refers not to people as such but to those apparent aspects of knowledge and motivation in readers and listeners that form the contexts for discourse and the ends of discourse.

He concludes, too, that "by its literal inappropriateness, [the term] is free to carry a much richer set of meanings" (249-50).

Park concedes that writers may mean any of a number of things when they use the term "audience." He outlines four different commonly used definitions for the term, ranging from the most simple and literal to the more complex and abstract. The first he describes as "[a]nyone who happens to listen to or read a given discourse" but hastens to add

that this understanding "is useless and misleading in serious rhetorical analysis."

The second definition he offers is "[e]xternal readers or listeners as they are involved in the rhetorical situation." This differs from the first definition, it would seem, in that it excludes the accidental, incidental, or marginally engaged reader. The second definition calls for a greater degree of commitment or involvement on the part of the reader. Park adds that this particular meaning continues to have value in scholarship where it "comes into play in analyses of the historical situation in which a given discourse appeared or in studies of the actual effect of discourse upon an audience."

The third meaning shifts the focus from actual readers to a construct of the creator. "Audience" in this sense refers to "[t]he set of conceptions or awareness in the writer's consciousness that shape the discourse. . . . We try to get at this set of awarenesses in shorthand fashion," Park explains, "when we ask, 'What audience do you have in mind?'"

The fourth definition he offers is explained this way:

> An ideal conception shadowed forth in the way the discourse itself defines and creates contexts for readers. We can come at this conception only through specific features of the text: "What does

this paragraph suggest about the audience?" (250)[1]

These latter two concepts of audience interest me the most in that they seem to provide the most logical and workable applications for literary analysis. The fourth definition shifts the focus from the writer's mind to the text--to that place more easily accessible to us as readers. No great imaginative leap is required to view the "specific features of the text" as the natural outworking of the assorted "conceptions or awareness in the writer's

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[1] Peter Elbow also offers a summary of the range of meanings for "audience," a term he seems to prefer to "reader." His list is somewhat more succinct and I include it here in a slightly abbreviated form:

a. The actual readers to whom the text will be given
b. The writer's conception of those readers--which may be mistaken
c. the audience that the text implies--which may be different still
d. the discourse community or even genre addressed or implied by the text
e. ghost or phantom "readers in the head" that the writer may unconsciously address or try to please

consciousness," however.[2] Taken this way, the fourth definition can be seen as an explanation or expansion of the third. As such we need not choose between the two when seeking a working definition from which to begin a study of audience. The two can be used together.

When viewed this way, Park's third and fourth definitions become in my estimation the most workable starting place for analyzing published prose in terms of audience. The fourth definition is particularly valuable in that it suggests the beginning of a methodology as well. Once a working definition of the key term has been accepted, the next step is to reread and analyze the literature using Park's key question as a mental transparency or overlay: "What does this paragraph [and subsequently the next, and the next] suggest about the audience?" I have further

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[2] One way an exploration of the writer's consciousness or awareness is being undertaken is through protocol analysis. This customarily takes one of two forms. It can involve the administration of a set of carefully planned questions about an individual's composition process put to the writer, either novice or accomplished, at various stages of writing, or it may involve having the writer keep a written or taped record of reflections of the process throughout composing. In either of these cases the data is collected and analyzed later for what it reveals about those conscious aspects of the composition process.

broken this down into several related but more specific questions and these will guide my analysis in the remainder of this study. What kind of reader is the writer asking me to be? What demands are being made of me? What assumptions are being made about my knowledge, attitudes, and values? What cues does the author give, what gestures does he or she make, what direction is offered to help me create a role for myself that will ensure a meaningful, satisfactory, enlightening, and perhaps even ennobling reading experience?

Other writers who have explored the area of "audience" would caution that deciding upon what is meant by the term is not that simple an enterprise. A plethora of adjectives has been evoked in an attempt to create ever more precise understandings of this term which is at once familiar and specialized. W. Daniel Wilson sifts through many of these in his article "Readers in Texts" and warns that "the study of these fictional beings is beginning to look like a tangled mass because of its unruly profuseness" (848). It should be noted that Wilson, as his title suggests, prefers the singular noun "reader" which can take the plural as opposed to the less flexible collective noun "audience" which in only the rarest of situations is considered as representing an individual.[3] (It is possible to speak of

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[3] Park discusses the synonymous use of these two terms and concludes that "most talk and writing on the subject maintain the distinction between 'audience' and 'readers'

"an audience of one" or a "private audience," for example, but in such instances there is always an implied comparison with what is perceived to be the norm or the expected--the larger group.)

Wilson's article surveys the work of Erwin Woolf, Wolfgang Iser, Walter Ong, Hannelore Link, and Gerald Prince and finds distinctions drawn between and preferences cited for terms such as "abstract reader," "characterized reader," "fictive reader," "ideal reader," "implied reader," "intended reader," "virtual reader," and even various compounds such as "characterized fictive reader" or "intended fictive reader." He includes Prince's term

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only tacitly and often ambiguously" (247). In my research I have neither discovered nor developed a critical distinction between the two and feel quite comfortable using them interchangeably, though I do prefer the term "audience" for several reasons. It has links with classical rhetoric that I think are worth preserving and perpetuating. It is the term preferred by Walter Ong to whom my own analysis of the two essayists in this project owes its origins. I also see "audience" as the preferred term because it seems to be inherently more multi-facetted in the truest sense of "many faces." I also see "audience" as less fixed, more amorphous, more capable of shifting and altering and hence more compatible with the notion of fictionalizing.

"narratee" in his catalogue as well.

In a later article Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford resume the discussion, but with a narrower focus, and explore the distinctions they see between "audience addressed" and "audience invoked" in terms of their particular field or interest, composition theory and pedagogy. Marilyn Cooper challenges the duality set up in their title, however, by reminding us "what unites both these perspectives: whether the writer is urged to analyze or invent the audience, the audience is always considered to be a construct in the writer's mind" (370).

As the search for the most precise adjective to describe audience continues, Park points out competing verbs that are lined up for scrutiny as well as writers are asked to "adjust to audiences or accommodate them." He concedes too that "we also talk about writers aiming at, assessing, defining, internalizing, construing, representing, imagining, characterizing, inventing, and evoking audiences" (248). One of the terms that Park leaves out of this particular list, though he does refer to the concept elsewhere in his essay, is that of fictionalizing the audience. This term, as it is used by Walter Ong in his article, "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," refers to the twofold process by which

> the writer must construct in his imagination, clearly or vaguely, an audience cast in some sort

> of role--entertainment seekers, reflective sharers of experience . . . inhabitants of a lost and remembered world of prepubertal latency . . . and so on. Second, we mean that the audience must correspondingly fictionalize itself. A reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life (12).

Here Ong is returning to a discussion begun in an earlier article, "Beyond Objectivity: the Reader-Writer Transaction as an Altered State of Consciousness," in which he affirms that "although readers are indeed fictions, they are not nothings, but are supremely important. Not only do they read, casting themselves in the fictionalized recipient role that the author has negotiated for them and with them," Ong asserts, "they also, paradoxically, have a great deal to say that goes into the texts they read."

Ong characterizes the process by which this and all communication takes place as "an insistently reciprocal operation." This he explains succinctly:

> The fictionalizing of a reader differs from the fictionalizing of anything else. For the fictionalized reader enters into the actuality of the author's writing. And the fictionalizing of the reader is carried on not only by the writer but also by the reader, who has to fictionalize

> himself or herself in key with the author's fictionalization in order to appropriate what the author has written. (6)

With all due respect to Ong--I would find it difficult to name another critic whose writing has moved and motivated me more--his use of the term "appropriate" here may suggest a rather restricted and more proprietary view of reading than is perhaps necessary, desirable, or even accurate. At the very least it does not seem entirely compatible with the rest of Ong's explanation which seems to advance a broader view of the reading process. Later in the same article, for example, Ong claims that "Mark Twain's reader is asked to take a special kind of hold on himself and on life" (12). Ong also calls writing a "fundamental deep paradox . . . involving human persons in their manifold dealings with one another"---a claim we can also make, I am confident, about reading (20). Clearly, something other than appropriation is happening here.

The reader accomplishes her role construction in response to any of a number of prompts by the author, all of which in some way urge, "This is who I need you to be in order for me to successfully play the role that I have decided upon for the next few paragraphs, pages, chapters, or volumes." The transaction breaks down when the writer fails to adequately encode her own role, her reader's role, or perhaps both; it may also break down when the reader

fails to decode, mistakenly decodes, finds decoding too frustrating, lacks the skills such as sufficient language aptitude or level of literacy to decode, or simply refuses to decode.

Though fictionalizing the audience, when it has been spoken or written about at all, is usually mentioned in the context of the construction and reconstruction of fiction, the same sort of process is at work, I believe, in most if not all forms of writing. It takes on a novel and perhaps paradoxical twist too when we consider it in terms of nonfictional writing such as the essay.

Annie Dillard is one contemporary essayist who makes particularly strong demands of her readers in this respect. She literally and figuratively goes out on a limb and places her readers there too in her 1974 Pulitzer prize-winning book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, described on the cover of its Bantam paperback edition as "a mystical excursion into the natural world."

Whether or not the fifteen related chapters that make up this book can rightfully be considered essays or even as nonfictional prose has been a matter of some debate. In speaking about initial reception of the book, Margaret Loewen Reimer observes that "reviewers were either rhapsodic in their praise or passionate in their indignation. Neither side, however, was quite sure in what tradition or genre the book belonged . . . " (182). Russell Hunt claims that the

author's own work calls into question some of the most commonly accepted distinctions traditionally made between fiction and nonfiction. He notes that Dillard is "not writing fiction, she's merely observing." He is quick to add, however, that what we receive "represents her creation of order from that observation, her discovery that even when you make a virtually superhuman attempt to 'just perceive' and not to order and judge and ratiocinate, you still wind up creating your own universe" (113-14).

C. Michael Curtis unequivocally calls Pilgrim an "essay collection" (107), but the author herself resists this classification. In an interview with Karla Hammond she comments that "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek was interpreted by many people as a book of essays, when in fact it was not. . . . It's simply a fifteen-chapter book" (31-32). One finds grounds upon which to question the author's reservations, however, when perusing the text's introductory material. Here we are informed that "Portions of this work previously appeared in the following publications: The Atlantic, Harper's Magazine, Travel and Leisure, Sports Illustrated, Prose, The Christian Science Monitor, The Carolina Quarterly, The Living Wilderness, and Cosmopolitan." It seems safe to assume that the publishers of these magazines and journals felt quite confident that while they were indeed publishing an excerpt from a book, or something destined for inclusion in a book, they were also

publishing essays, as is their practice, when they reproduced Dillard's work.

While there is no disputing that a number of themes do run through the complete Pilgrim and that much more binds it together than a calendar year, it remains that the chapters individually are able to stand alone quite well. While few would dispute that their primary function is performed in service to a greater whole, Dillard's own comments in the same interview on the essay and its content and structure seem at least to allow for a secondary perception of these chapters as essays:

> The idea of the nonfictional essay's having the abstract intellectual structures of poetry interests me. Its content is the world. Its content isn't the poet's brain and isn't the worlds [sic]. Its content is the structure itself and that which is stretched over the structure. The fabric of the surface is the world itself with its data, even, as well as such sensory pleasures as the world's days afford (35).

Earlier in the same interview Dillard describes those essays which deserve to be considered art as having "a structure and form which is not merely discursive, but instead reflexive, internally ordered, self-referential" (33). Again, it would seem that the chapters of Pilgrim qualify here, each of them being, in the author's words, "a

little chip off the old art" (34).

Further attempts to classify Pilgrim at Tinker Creek inevitably mention the author's indebtedness to Henry David Thoreau, his Walden Pond experiment, and his subsequent account of it. Charles Nicol, for one, observes that "in the tradition of Thoreau her book is less an observation of nature than a meditation on man's place in the world, less the chronicle of a year than a year's honing of a lifetime's insights" (489). While it is true that Dillard does not merely transplant the Walden experiment into another century, she does, like her predecessor, spend a fixed amount of time, in her case a year, in a fairly remote setting which she identifies early on as "a creek, Tinker Creek, in a valley in Virginia's Blue Ridge" (2). She writes about this time in just over a dozen chapters which follow the progression of the seasons, beginning with a day described as "one of those excellent January partly cloudies" and ending at a similar point approximately twelve months later with the observation, "Another year has twined away, unrolled and dropped across nowhere like a flung banner painted in gibberish" (3, 264).

Dillard never allows the reader to lose track of the season under consideration for very long. Chapter 3 is titled, "Winter," for example, and begins, "It is the first of February;" Chapter 5 begins in "the sunny February woods." Chapter 6 announces, "It is early March." The next

chapter is titled "Spring" and the following one begins with a reference to "lengthening June days." Even the simplest reference, such as we find at the beginning of Chapter 9, "It's summer," requires a mental adjustment on the part of the reader and the creation of and participation in the simplest of shared fictions. Indeed, it may or it may not be summer when the reader is reading, just as it may or it may not be summer when the writer is writing. Each consents to this shared temporal adjustment in order to facilitate reading.

The calendar and the seasons are not the only ordering principles in Pilgrim, however. The first picture presented traces movement from outside to inside as the cat jumps through the bedroom window, bringing with him signs of the outer world. He arrives "stinking of urine and blood" and leaves "paw prints in blood" making the narrator appear to have been "painted with roses."

The narrator's multiple role of explorer or stalker and reader and writer also duplicates this pattern repeatedly in the text. Dillard draws attention to such movement when she says, "I bloom indoors in the winter like a forced forsythia; I come in to come out. At night I read and write, and things I have never understood become clear; I reap the harvest of the rest of year's planting" (38). What her text presents us with is a view of the outer world as it is reconstructed indoors--filtered, sorted, and sifted

through the writer's own inner world. Her writing also becomes a commentary on the process of writing or creating. Try as she might to empty herself, to be a new wineskin, to overcome self-consciousness ("the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies") and to "[experience] the present purely through my senses" (81, 80), Dillard is forced to concur with Donald E. Carr's observations which she records in Pilgrim on "one-celled animals whose sense impressions are not edited for the brain: 'This is philosophically interesting in a rather mournful way, since it means that only the simplest animals perceive the universe as it is'" (19).

The earliest picture in her book serves not only to establish one of the central patterns of movement in the text, but also functions as an invitation to respond to the physical world and its urine, blood, and milk; we are asked to at least take this world into account rather than to ignore or wish it away, as one might be tempted to do with a nocturnal visit by a less than pristine pet. Dillard nudges us as readers into new ways of seeing by suggesting that roses can be painted with blood. She mixes here images of life and love with an image of death, and we soon come to see that this will become characteristic of her offerings throughout the book.

In this opening paragraph Dillard makes herself vulnerable to readers in the first picture she chooses to

show us. This is not a professionally posed, touched up studio portrait. This is far from the well-dressed carefully posed woman who greets us on Pilgrim's cover.[4] Rather, we are invited to glimpse the writer as she sleeps. We see her in her unconscious state and, in being provided with such a glimpse, we are at once initiated into a degree of trust and intimacy.

Also on this first page the author poses the question, "What blood was this, and what roses?" She sets herself up as questioner here, signalling her intention of departing from the standard pattern of having the audience or reader ask the questions while the writer provides the answers. There is going to be at the very least some shifting or sharing of roles here. The author's initial questions early on suggest a working through, a grappling, a searching for answers.

The opening scene of Pilgrim does more than raise a few questions. It shocks us. This shock does not diminish either, at least not for long. Dillard's pictures disturb our comfort, they rattle our complacency. In "The Fixed," for example, she informs us that "When a mantis has crunched up the last shred of its victim, it cleans its smooth green face like a cat." She accepts this matter-of-factly, but as

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[4] I refer here to the Bantam Books' edition first printed in 1975.

readers we may not be there yet. She creates a space between writer and reader, though she hastens to add that "hardened entomologist J. Henri Fabre confessed to being startled witless everytime" by the mantis's behaviour (55). Indeed, she assures us, we are in good company if we are at times uncomfortable with what we have been shown.

Suzanne Clark offers another reading of Pilgrim's opening scene. She claims that it presents us with the "mysterious," with "the self's encounter with signs of otherness--a violation, known only by its bloody traces," and concludes, "The meaning is untranslatable." She suggests, "The metaphor identity resembles the site of erotic violation, the scene of a rape," and surmises that what we may have here is a "sacrificial posture of a self which is neither subject nor object [but rather] abject," drawing from Julia Kristeva's The Powers of Horror (113-14). She further suggests that

> The perceiving teller of Dillard's narrations moves again and again from the realistic detail provided by observation and citation, what we might associate with the cultural mastery of the natural world, to a being overwhelmed, rape as rapture--the female version of the fortunate fall. (115)

In the process of observing and being observed, of overwhelming and being overwhelmed, Dillard pays as much

attention to craft as to creation. Nowhere else are Dillard's form and content more inextricably interwoven than when she writes about the process of seeing and making sense of her world while also creating the world of the text. Hunt, in a joint review of Pilgrim and a book by Alice Munro, notes that "the difference . . . between the perception and the construction of reality" is "one of the most fundamental common elements of these two books." He finds "this process--of perception or of construction--at the heart of their style and their interest" (116). He pays both authors what may amount to the ultimate compliment that any reviewer can make when he concludes that "reading them makes a difference" (119).

Dillard's concern for making sense of her world and the world of the text extends to the regard she shows for her readers. Not only has she laboured with the first tasks mentioned, but she struggles to ensure that her readers too are able to make sense of her world and their world and the shared world of the text. At times, even in the midst of her exuberance, she exercises deliberate restraint. She treats her readers with courtesy, coaching them, warning them of possible misreadings, and acknowledging the necessity of variant and even seemingly contradictory readings.

She begins the story of the Polyphemus moth, for example, with a double disclaimer. "I have no intention of

inflicting all my childhood memories on anyone," she says. "Far less do I want to excoriate my old teachers who, in their bungling, unforgettable way, exposed me to the natural world" (59). Here she tells us the points she is not trying to make before she continues. She alerts us to the possibility for misreading in order to direct us toward a reading that comes closer to the one she anticipates.

In doing so, however, she is not being overly prescriptive or manipulative. Rather, she allows room for multiple different readings. What she sees in nature and subsequently records essentially demands this, for hers is the world of the giant water beetle and the puppy, the praying mantis and tree with the lights in it. In the chapter "The Fixed," a title which itself suggests a number of readings including the ironic, she poses the question, "What geomancy reads what the windblown sand writes on the desert rock?" and she offers two radically different and it would seem mutually exclusive readings. "I read there that all things live by a generous power and dance to a mighty tune; or I read there that all things are scattered and hurled, that our every arabesque and grand jeté is a frantic variation on our one free fall." Here she tells us what she reads and thereby suggests how and what we may read. Sometimes she sees the creek this way: "I can hardly believe that this grace never flags, that the pouring from ever-renewable sources is endless, impartial, and free;"

other times she turns away concluding that "The damned thing was flowing because it was pushed." And yet other times she is forced to admit, "That was two weeks ago; tonight I don't know" (68-69).

Such a variety of perspectives can initially be confusing to the reader accustomed to being offered fewer variables within prose worlds and, correspondingly, fewer roles for himself to play. For those willing to accept one of Dillard's earliest and repeated premises, however, that "our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery," Pilgrim offers sufficient direction for an exploration of that mystery (9, 143). The author is quick to admit her limits, thankfully, and never promises neatly pre-packaged answers. What she hopes to leave us with instead are sufficient knowledge and vision to allow us to "at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise" (9).

"Don't expect more than this," she says at one point "and a mental ramble. I'm in the market for some present tense . . ." (85). Here she creates an impression of intimacy through the use of direct speech. And by offering a directive she causes us to adjust our mental course. She remains scrupulous in her attempts not to mislead.

Similar asides in the form of cautions or underscoring appear throughout the text. Something as simple as "legendarily," appearing in italics in a discussion of

bamboo and torture, demonstrates that she is anxious to separate history from hearsay, confident that such distinctions will be important to us as well (163). At times she tempers her underscoring. "I don't want to stress this too much," she says in a discussion of experiencing the present (80). But in a section on the mystery surrounding the meaning of bird songs she asserts, "It's an important point" (106). Here she assumes the role of anxious and perhaps somewhat frustrated lecturer and we as readers correspondingly become the students who may not be paying enough attention or who are being warned that they will be called upon to account for this information again. "The point I want to make," she says elsewhere about the snakeskin and its unusual shape, and we find ourselves admonished to sit up and take notice (73). Dillard repeats this strategy in her discussion of intricacy by ending a section with the assertion, "This is the point" (127). And later, commenting upon evolution's apparent preference for death over the individual, she says, "This is the key point" (176).

At times she takes a less aggressive stance and actually pleads for her readers' indulgence. "I want to think about trees," she announces at one point, and we as readers automatically pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves for exercising the requested generosity. She thus cleverly places us in the role of the

benevolent granter of concessions. Our mental response of "by all means" or the equivalent keeps us in the conversation. She also craves our indulgence and that of an unnamed subatomic physicist when she follows a quotation of his with the request, "let me twist his meaning," and subsequently launches an extended metaphor of the future as waves (103).

At times she realizes that her readers may be getting weary, perhaps overwhelmed by her acknowledged ancient mariner compulsion to unload what her internal "trivia machine" has collected (133). "Here is one last story," she promises at midpoint in the chapter "Fecundity," with still a third of the book remaining. "Bear with me one last time," she asks, this time just pages before the book does end (266). She assumes the posture of a mind reader here or at the least the astute observer of responses; she has heard a sigh from her audience or perhaps caught them glancing furtively at the clock. She assures them that the end is in sight, even though the reader at times holds evidence to the contrary in the handful of pages still to be turned. Her comment reveals her regard for her reader; her inability or unwillingness to wind down as quickly as might be expected, however, testifies to the greater regard in which she holds her vision.

Dillard also demonstrates her regard for her reader in her refusal to be dogmatic despite her obvious enthusiasm

and passion. She is quite tentative at times and to readers this uncertainty actually is quite comforting. It is easy, especially for the modern reader, to feel defensive and resistant to an authoritarian author, to someone unable or unwilling to entertain the notion that she just might be wrong. But when Dillard says, "The answer must be, I think" (8), she does so with a combination of confidence and assertiveness tempered with the gentlest of qualifications that allows the reader the freedom to conclude, "but it might be otherwise." Such granting of freedom to the reader creates and nurtures a democratic readership.

Such a role may be a new one for readers involved in what Ong calls "this game of literacy"--readers who have been conditioned by generations of authors to acknowledge or at least expect the voice of authority in print (12). Dillard clearly joins those who are interested in expanding the rules of the game. She asks her readers to carry the act of fictionalizing further than they may have before, to not only fictionalize themselves in response to the author's fictionalization of herself and her audience, but to be open to the numerous experimentations with roles that the author allows herself, and correspondingly to make the necessary shifts and adjustments that these require. Such adjusting of roles and perceptions of roles is necessary because, in part at least, as Ong says, "writing is itself an indirection," and will remain such "[n]o matter what pitch

of frankness, directness, or authenticity he [a writer] may strive for." Ong boldly moves his discussion well beyond reading and writing encounters, as does Dillard, when he says, "For man lives largely by indirection, and only beneath the indirections that sustain him is his true nature to be found" (20).

Further evidence of Dillard's openness and her willingness to expand the conventions of literary nonfiction are apparent when we hear her say things like, "It's a good question," "We don't know what's going on here," "We don't know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery . . ." (7-9). It is perhaps that last claim, more than any other in Pilgrim, both in its simplicity and in the evocation of elemental power in its imagery, that moves a reader to grant the author belief and acceptance.

At this same place in the text, Dillard demonstrates her refusal to work backwards from a predetermined conclusion in the construction of her argument. Her use of the plural pronoun includes the reader as well in this resolve. "We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here," she says. "Then we can at least wail the right question into the swaddling band of darkness, or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise" (9). Here she allows for a wide range of discovery and a corresponding latitude of response. While at times we are called upon to

construct ourselves in fairly prescribed ways, at other times she suggests that we locate ourselves where we will. The demands are simply that we watch fully and with care--carefully.

Not only are we called upon to watch diligently, we are expected to listen with care as well. Dillard expects us to adopt the role of listeners to the recounting of a voyage. Indeed, much of Pilgrim assumes the form and tone of the travel narrative. Most loosely stated, what we encounter follows the formula, "I went here, I saw this, it made me think of this, I saw something else, and then I came home." The pattern is familiar. It is one we all use in those extended periods of monologue where we take centre stage and assume an interest and curiosity on our audience's behalf in our mixture of observations, remembrances, associations, seemingly random at times, though more often than not assembled to make a point.

In speaking to us this way, and it is here that Dillard's narrative most closely approximates the spoken voice, she expects us to be able to accommodate shifts in her narrative, to be able to accept with equal felicity the simple declaration, "I use the downstream fence as a swaying bridge across the creek," together with the disquieting associations only a few lines later where she refers to a herd of steers as "all bred beef," "a human product like rayon," "a field of shoes" (4).

In asking us to mentally follow her on her journey, Dillard creates the role for us of audience at a travelogue. One of the ways she does this is through liberal scattering of the simple, typical, familiar markers of this kind of discourse throughout her text: "I set out," "I go," "I sit," "I cross," "West of the house," and "north of me," to point out just a few.

As a reader being asked to accept her narrative within this framework, I am reminded of the last travelogue I attended. It was in Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium and was on Scandinavia, a place I have long wanted to see, but am beginning to fear I never shall. I have wanted to visit it more than many of the places I have visited. More than Ireland, California, Italy, or Alaska. The wanting to see firsthand coupled with the fear that I never will took me to the travelogue. It may well be that in general some of that same paradox of anticipation and resignation informs and motivates most readers and viewers of the travelogue.

In Dillard's travelogue we are not offered the dispassionate, fact-filled, thirty-minute historical and cultural tour. We are asked to accept that the voyage is important to the traveller in ways that are difficult to articulate. The voyage is at once physical and spiritual. It is at once part of the self as well as the search for, the construction, and the reconstruction of the self. "I am drawn to this spot," she confesses. "I come to it as to an

oracle; I return to it as a man years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm" (5).

One of the voices Dillard adopts most typically throughout Pilgrim in the sections that read most like a travel narrative is that of the casual, unrehearsed, eye-witness. One of the places we encounter this is in Dillard's flood story. "That morning I'm standing at my kitchen window," she begins, giving us time and location (149). She creates here the fiction of the shared immediate present in painting a scene that is very familiar to her and in its commonality easily accessible to us.[5] As listeners we expect the story to follow the familiar pattern, "and this guy comes up the walk and sees me watching him and calls out . . ." because we have heard and told many similarly patterned stories ourselves. We recognize the voice of the minimally decorated, seemingly straight-

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[5] Another place she does this sort of thing is in speaking of her examination of monarch butterfly wings. She says, "What I had at the end of this delicate labour is laying here on this study desk" (256, emphasis mine). She creates the sense of the shared immediate present through her use of familiar images and through her use of the adverb "here" and the demonstrative adjective "this," both of which assume our familiarity with the scene if not our actual presence there.

forward, linear account where content is privileged and form, by its very familiarity, seems to be less of a concern.

This voice and the corresponding role it invites us to assume are in marked contrast to some of the other voices and roles we encounter in the text. Dillard, whose own prose is not infrequently described as poetic and who herself has published a book of poetry,[6] makes a number of references to other poets throughout Pilgrim, quotes some of their work, and not infrequently mirrors their images, word choice, and syntax in her own prose.

Clark notes that Dillard's "witnessing offers testimony to the powers of horror as well as to the powers of awe, in the tradition of Emily Dickinson" (119). Clark also links Dillard with other poets and their sense of vision and subject matter:

> Like what Geoffrey Hartman once called the "unmediated vision" of poets like Wordsworth, Hopkins, Yeats, Rilke, and Valery, Dillard's is the paradoxical subject explored by symbolist and modernist poetics: the one who breaks the cultural traditions coded by language, who opens up imprisoning conventionality. (121)

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[6] Tickets for a Prayer Wheel, Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 1974.

Clark includes Gerard Manley Hopkins in her list of poets whose work bears comparison with Dillard's, and it is this particular poet to whom Dillard is indebted for her most frequent borrowings and imitations. It should come as no surprise that Dillard would use some of the images and syntax of this nineteenth-century Jesuit writer with whose sympathies she finds herself often compatible and aligned. We hear echoes of "God's Grandeur," particularly the lines, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil," when Dillard maintains that "the whole world sparks and flames" (9). "The Windhover" is evoked when she speaks of "the most beautiful day of the year" leaving her with a "dizzying, drawn sensation" (10). And she actually names the poet and quotes him when she says, "it could be that a bird sings I am sparrow, sparrow, sparrow, as Gerard Manley Hopkins suggests: 'myself it speaks and spells, Crying <u>What I do is me: for that I came</u>'" (106). These lines come from the lesser known "As Kingfishers Catch Fire."[7]

Dillard equates the "fringe of the fish's fin" with "the intricacy of the world's spotted and speckled detail"

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[7] References to and quotations from Hopkins' poetry are taken from Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, eds., <u>Victorian Poetry and Poetics</u>, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 689-721.

(129), evoking "Pied Beauty" and, appropriately, describes a mystical infusion with a series of verbs particularly resonant of the poet. "You wait in all naturalness without expectation of hope, emptied, translucent," she says, "and that which comes rocks and topples you; it will shear, loose, launch, winnow, grind" (259). She fittingly ends her book with a return to the opening image of the cat with the bloody paw prints which leaves her, as does her encounter with the larger world, "bloodied and mauled, wrung, dazzled, drawn" (270).

Dillard also appeals to our knowledge of other well-known poets including Marvell, Wordsworth, Blake, Robert Burns, and Dylan Thomas. "Innocence sees that this is it," she tells us, "and finds it world enough, and time" (81). In her account of Xerxes having a commemorative piece of jewellery struck to help him recall a remarkable vision, she laments that "no gold medal worn around your neck will bring back the glad hour" (88). She quotes Blake as having said, "'He who does not prefer Form to Colour is a Coward!'" (136), and borrows from a Scottish dialect when she says that "the pressures of growth gang aft a-gley" (171). Finally, she gives us some lines from the Welsh poet, though not his name, at the end of the chapter "Fecundity": "'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives my green age.'"

Lesser known poets receive mention in her work as well.

She offers us two lines of poetry from Michael Goldman: "'When the Muse comes She doesn't tell you to write;/ she says get up for a minute, I've something to show you, stand here'" (83-84). She credits "friend Rosanne Coggeshall, the poet" with the claim that "'sycamore' is the most intrinsically beautiful word in English" (86). In "Stalking" she includes some fragments of John Knoepfle's poem: "'and christ is red rover . . . and the children are calling/come over come over'" (205).

These borrowings, both the acknowledged and the unacknowledged, suggest to the reader that he is expected to read with an ear and an eye to the poetic. He is asked to attend not only to the vision but to the language used to portray that and similar visions. Though scientific detail and discourse are far from absent in this book, the greater part of Dillard's writing reveals that the author is as conscious of her craft as she is of her subject and that her craft indeed does become one of her subjects.

Dillard's delight in language becomes the reader's as well. Clearly she expects her audience to be not merely information seekers, a group wanting to know the flora and fauna, microbes and miscellany of Tinker Creek. We are offered these, surely, but what we get much more of is the joy of discovery and the joy of shaping that discovery. Dillard expects her readers to delight also in language, in the surprises it offers, in the unfathomable way it is able

to deliver what we perceive as truth.

Her delight in language is reflected not only in the poetic borrowings and allusions in her text, in her own meticulously crafted prose, but also in the evidence of her own copious reading to which Pilgrim bears witness. Eudora Welty says of Dillard, "Speaking of the universe very often, she is yet self-surrounded, and, beyond that, book-surrounded," and adds that "Her search for a vision has been at first-hand and at secondhand; a dual search." A reader coming to Pilgrim for the first time initially may be puzzled at the author's habit of borrowing and quoting so freely while so rarely offering references or at best fragments of references. Welty remarks on this and in an appeal to her reader admits, "An odd bit, unattributed, is tantalizing me: Who said, 'Gravity, to Copernicus, is the nostalgia of things to become spheres'?" (5). For someone who insists on watching with great discipline, Dillard seems both willing and able to forego the traditions of documentation with the clearest of consciences.

In the first chapter, for example, she offers a quotation from Einstein but does not tell us where we might find it. Her biblical borrowings cont.in minimal or no documentation, and not infrequently we are told, "I had read" (6). Far less frequently are we told what or whom specifically was read. For someone trained in the scholarly tradition, this delivers a bit of a jolt.

Sometimes we are given partial attributions, such as "James Houston describes" (13), "according to Farley Mowat" (42), or "Picasso said" (83), but seldom are we told when or where such claims were made or recorded. The exceptions are few. When she speaks of Steward Edward White in her chapter "Seeing," she gives us his name, two quotations, and a book title; but even then we cannot be sure if both passages are from this book, for never are any page numbers given, and rarely is further bibliographic information supplied. In this same chapter we find another of her more complete references, this to "a wonderful book" by Marius von Senden called Space and Sight (25). She mentions Stephen Graham's The Gentle Art of Tramping and calls it "antique and elegant" (80), and gives a similar commercial for Rutherford Platt, calling his The Great American Forest "one of the most interesting books ever written" (164). She treats Edwin Way Teale similarly, calling The Strange Lives of Familiar Insects "a book I couldn't live without" (168), and also names Horace Kephart's Camping and Woodcraft (218), and Will Barker's Familiar Insects of North America (227).[8]

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[8] In the introductory pages to Pilgrim acknowledgement for permission to reprint is cited for only four separate titles and in each case the author's name, book title, and publisher are mentioned.

By my count Dillard names close to seventy people in Pilgrim to whom she is indebted for material, and this excludes the poets previously mentioned and her equally massive biblical borrowings from both the Old and New Testaments. Marc Chénetier claims that she mentions Thoreau at least six times. He sees Dillard engaging in what he calls a "systematic ransacking of previous texts." He claims that Pilgrim offers us "a sort of symphonic reading whose score is provided by an intertext made obvious and possibly programmatic" (157-58). In failing to offer much more documentation than a name, it hardly seems likely that Dillard would be making these omissions as a result of an oversight or through indifference. The rest of the book reveals to us just the opposite--a careful and meticulous observer and recorder. Her omissions, therefore, must be deliberate.

It seems to me that these omissions signal something important about the type of audience she is asking us to be. She is not presenting herself as an authority in the traditional sense, nor are we being asked to respond to proof offered in any traditional sense. Rather, we are being asked to accept the validity of her experience. Here she dismantles the roles of scholar, researcher, lecturer and demonstrates that who she is is largely a product of what she has seen and experienced and this includes what she has read. She feels free to borrow from and appropriate

other authors in ways similar to what we find happening in much current fiction. Dillard offers us what she has read and what she has experienced. "Not as the textbooks giveth, give I unto you," she seems to suggest. Her voice is the voice of the informed and enthusiastic conversationalist who has established a spirit of cooperation and trust with the reader.

Clearly, Dillard is not trying to pass off borrowed material as her own; the reader is never in doubt about what has been discovered firsthand and what she has taken on loan. The absence of documentation should be treated in much the same manner as we regard the absence of a map pinpointing Tinker Creek, or the absence of any precise locators of any of the particular sightings she relates. The validity for what she presents rests in experience. Inherent in traditional scholarly discourse is the invitation to repeat the experiment or to double check the evidence and argument. By resisting this type of discourse and its conventions, Dillard, it would seem, is issuing a vastly different invitation. Perhaps this invitation is most simply stated in another of her unattributed borrowings: "Knock; seek; ask" (192).

Most readers will admit that at times, at least, there seems to be something sinister about lengthy footnotes or pages of bibliography. Like the string of letters after someone's name on personalized stationery, business cards,

or the plaque on desk or door, they seem to proclaim, "by the authority invested in me," thereby adding to the owner's voice the weighty voice of the institution. Perhaps at times this is necessary. Dillard seems to be insisting, however, that this is not one of those times. And somehow as readers we believe her without the weight of documentation. Something in that distinctive, authentic, recognizable voice invites and is granted belief. She accomplishes this through a combination of several things: passion, focus, humour, and the willingness to admit at times that she does not know. It would be an interesting study in the rhetoric of persuasion, I think. Would I buy a used car from this lady? Possibly. Would I follow her into the woods? Any day!

And if I did, I could be sure that the journey would be as funny as it was fascinating. Dillard tell us in An American Childhood that "Our parents would sooner have left us out of Christmas than leave us out of a joke" (50). Theirs was the household of gags and practical jokes, "hypnotized" hens and do-it-yourself ten-foot sea monsters. Dillard, not surprisingly, grew up with a highly developed sense of the comic and recalls pondering the fine art of being funny:

> How long, I wondered, could you stretch this out? How boldly could you push an audience--not, in Mother's terms, to "slay them," but to please them

> in some grand way? How could you convince the listeners that you knew what you were doing, that the payoff would come? Or conversely, how long could you lead them to think you were stupid, a dumb blonde, to enhance their surprise at the punch line, and heighten their pleasure in the good story you had controlled all along? Alone, energetic and trying to fall asleep, or walking the residential streets long distances every day, I pondered these things. (54)

Dillard remarks of one of her rambles around Tinker Creek, "I was walking along the edge of the island to see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs" (5). Such a statement, which is not untypical in Pilgrim, delights with its unusual twist. The speaker delivers something other than the expected and in the incongruity there is delight. Here is one of the stock formulas of comedy, one we encounter frequently but, it would seem, never tire of.

Recently I noticed the humorist Dave Barry doing much the same thing in a short essay, "Daze of Wine and Roses." In a discussion of the differences between the typical beer drinker and the typical wine drinker, Barry concludes, "I realize I am generalizing here, but, as is often the case when I generalize, I don't care" (20). The flippant and defiant surprise, clipped ending is one of the fundamental

patterns of verbal comedy. Both Barry and Dillard use it deftly, recognizing that it involves more than playing with experience and language. It involves playing with the audience too as described above by Dillard in her childhood reminiscences.

The success of this type of humour depends on catching the audience off guard. The reader reads along, anticipating what he believes is to come, and then periodically finds himself surprised by something quite different. The delight is the delight of being caught again in one's complacency, of being wilfully tricked. The gag works every time. We see this technique at work again in Dillard when she says, "Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly: insects, it seems gotta do one horrible thing after another" (63).

Dillard casts her readers as those with a sense of humour and a sense of the absurd. She expects us to see the humour in the universal acceptability of weather as a safe and welcome topic for conversation (49), and she expects us to be able to laugh even at what might strike us on one level as horrible and repugnant. Consider, for example, her account of the male praying mantis's dilemma:

> The mating rites of mantises are well known: a chemical produced in the head of the male insect says, in effect, "No, don't go near her, you fool, she'll eat you alive." At the same time a

> chemical in his abdomen says, "Yes, by all means, now and forever yes." (57-58)

Not a small part of Dillard's humour is designed to counter-balance the weightiness and inexplicableness of much that she records. She invites levity from time to time in an attempt to balance the horrible against the humorous. When talking about the seemingly endless variety in the insect kingdom, for example, where "No form is too gruesome, no behavior too grotesque," she counters with a swift, "You ain't so handsome yourself" (65).

It is interesting to note that this sentence falls within the same paragraph as "Nature is, above all, profligate." Dillard switches styles here like some motorists switch lanes. Her shifts are rapid, unpredictable, unsignalled. In what some might see as approaching schizophrenic prose, Dillard's mixture of styles establishes her as the consummate, seasoned lecturer/entertainer and we subsequently become the amused learners. Her ability to change style radically and whimsically keeps our attention as does the unusual combination of new information and direct address punctuated by the occasional poke in the ribs. One quickly concludes that there is more than one creator at work here who "loves pizzazz" (137).

One type of humour that Dillard employs occasionally might be called persuasion by absurdity. Speaking of the

horsehair worm and its incredulous lifecycle, she concludes, "You'd be thin, too" (173). The majority of the appeal in this type of persuasive discourse is not logic so much as it is the novelty and delight found in the ludicrous image; trying even for a second to create the fiction suggested requires an incredible imaginative feat. A similar surreal perspective is shared when, in response to Dr. Urquhart's discovery that monarch butterflies taste like dried toast, Dillard fights the tendency to view the monarchs' migration as "a vast and fluttering tea tray for shut-ins" (254).

When Dillard says to her readers, "You'd be thin, too," she is using one of the most common and easily recognizable ways of creating a role for her audience. Through the use of personal pronouns, singular or plural, she is able to include the reader in the text. More often than not, too, these inclusions contain a corresponding assumption demanding some fictionalization on the part of the reader. We encounter this throughout Pilgrim. "Your daughter has just come home from school . . ." she says at one point, and in so doing she sets up a fictional situation of varying degrees for her readers who may or may not have a daughter. This young lady may be of school age. She may be walking in the door from school, but more likely she is not. There may be more than one daughter to choose from, and so on.

In order to enter into this reading transaction, I as a reader have to make a mental adjustment. Writers have been

asking me to do this sort of thing ever since I graduated from my first primers so it is not very difficult. In fact for the most part it has become a conditioned response. Like driving in familiar territory, it has become almost automatic. It is a fictionalization that I can perform very easily. In this given instance, I do not have a daughter, but I know people like me who do. I have thought about having a daughter. I can imagine what it might be like. I have even imagined names for this fictional daughter; if I were choosing today she would be Lauren or Monica. I myself am a daughter. If I did have a daughter right now, she would likely be of school age, and so on the basis of that combination of knowledge and imagination, I can construct the scenario requested of me and continue reading.

A similar process goes on, I believe, when Dillard asks us as readers to consider evolution or creation. We may have our own particular beliefs or biases one way or another, but we exercise the ability to consider from the other point of view, to at least grant, "it may yet be so, or perhaps it is somewhat so." Such demands are made of us when we read, "What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable profusion of forms. Or what do we think of nothingness, those sickening reaches of time in either direction?" (7). She also says elsewhere, "You are evolution" and in the next line, "You are God" (131).

She asks us to play a number of roles and many of them for the briefest of moments throughout Pilgrim. Sometimes she has us juggling hats with the speed of a magician. We are told, for example, "You are Xerxes in Persia" (87), "You are a man, a retired railroad worker," "You are a starling," "a sculptor," "a chloroplast," "tired?" "finished?" (130-31). Each of these--unless by the slightest of chances you did at one time ride the rails, or even now dabble in clay--demands a reorientation of perspective, an imagining, a willing participation in some game the author would have us play.

Sometimes Dillard uses pronouns to cast us as her companions. "I am sitting here, you are sitting there," she informs us in "Intricacy." "Say even that you are sitting across this kitchen table from me right now. Our eyes meet; a consciousness snaps back and forth. What we know, at least for starters, is: here we--so incontrovertibly--are" (127-28).

Sometimes Dillard shifts her pronouns a number of times in one story, forcing us to try on several roles before we are through. She does this most noticeably as the book begins. Within three paragraphs she shifts pronouns twice from "I" to "we" and then to "you." We read and correspondingly imagine: "I used to have a cat. . . . We wake if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence. . . . These are morning matters, pictures

you dream. . . ."

In addition to asking us to fictionalize ourselves in any of a number of roles, Dillard occasionally introduces other players into the text as well. Within the first few pages of Pilgrim, for example, she interjects a voice other than her own, though it becomes hers in a sense as she plays and replays it as a recurring theme in the text: "'Seem like we're just set down here,' a woman said to me recently, 'and don't nobody know why'" (2).

Other voices enter her text from time to time. In the starling story, for example, the voices of Waynesboro residents are called upon to testify that the stink "'will knock you over'" (36). Dillard interjects these voices into the middle of her narrative, and by imbedding their voices within her voice she creates other narrators who are part of the audience too. They listen to their story told by someone else and occasionally participate themselves in the telling.

The text as a whole possesses a distinctive voice of its own nonetheless. This voice, or combination or alternation of voices, is spoken of most frequently in terms of style or tone. In explaining his understanding of tone in Dillard's work, Robert Paul Dunn draws some conclusions that have particular applications for the study of a writer fictionalizing herself and her audience. He does so, unfortunately, in the company of some rather questionable

assumptions. Speaking of Dillard he says,

> What is unique about her can perhaps best be understood by considering the prominence of tone in her writings. Tone covers a writer's entire attitude--toward the materials drawn upon, toward himself, and toward the audience. On the one hand, tone is basically unserious, a kind of game. This is what is meant when tone is thought of as merely tone, as something used to dress up the piece. Tone in this sense includes all the literary elements a reader appreciates in a work: sententious or well-phrased thought, rhythm, metaphor, puns and so on. But tone can have a wider function than this. In this more serious sense tone is almost synonymous with the writer's vision; it is, at any rate, the way he [sic] identifies his own character and function in a literary piece and the means by which he makes himself and his purposes acceptable to his readers.
>
> Although tone is commonly disparaged as of little consequence, it goes beyond the merely decorative when a writer employs it to create various voices or roles within a piece. (24)

I question Dunn's claim that "tone is commonly disparaged as of little consequence" and wonder if the

writer may be guilty here of constructing an imaginary enemy. It is difficult to imagine someone who, in seriously reflecting on writing, would make such a claim. I wonder too what Dunn means by "prominence of tone." Can we conceive of a writer demonstrating an absence of tone? Is tone something that can be added to a piece of writing in varying amounts? Perhaps what Dunn is referring to would better be described as Dillard's predominant tone, for he later very aptly describes her tone as "oracular, meditative, irregular, unpredictable, and essentially discontinuous" (25). In the same essay he labels it "witty seriousness" (27). He finds that this tone "not only helps Dillard to image her world, but also to involve her readers in her vision" and adds that "In the longer books Dillard employs not only a host of 'jokes' or tonal tricks . . . [she] also creates a variety of voices or roles to express herself and to overcome the [Freudian] 'censor' in her readers" (25-26).

Though the roles that Dillard adopts which interest Dunn primarily are those of artist and nun, he does devote considerable attention to Dillard's exploration of the writer as stalker. She uses this metaphor early on in the text to describe herself when she says, "I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker" (12), and later she devotes an entire chapter to this idea. With reference to this chapter called "Stalking," Dunn observes that Dillard "was

even then practising the game on her readers as well as on muskrats" (26). Melvin Maddocks picks up on this as well in his review when he says that "As she guides the attention to a muskrat, to a monarch butterfly, a heron or a coot, Miss Dillard is stalking the reader as surely as any predator stalks its game" (103). He goes on to list a number of ways she does this. She feigns disinterest in the reader, he claims, and focuses the reader's attention on detail in an attempt to persuade him of his own limited vision. By extension, the reader will more readily accept this conclusion and the subsequently offered guidance regarding spiritual matters. The writer, he claims, also engages her readers in role-playing in an effort to keep her own and her reader's vision directed away from her.

At times Dillard downplays her own role as creator. In an interview with Philip Yancey she claims, "As a writer, I am less a creator than an audience to th artistic vision" (15). Yancey picks up on this and remarks that Dillard writes "as an observer, perched on the edge, but also immersed in the world," urging us "to see it with new, enlightened eyes" (16). One of the roles then that Dillard adopts most emphatically for herself is that of an audience.

She returns to this concept several times in Pilgrim. This is not surprising, since much of her writing is concerned with watching, waiting, attending. We first encounter the term in the opening chapter where she portrays

the creator as carnival magician. Here she says, "The audience, if there is an audience at all, is dizzy from head-turning, dazed." She draws frequently upon the metaphor of the show or carnival, and locates herself as a member of the audience. She places herself next to rather than in front of her readers, however, when she says, "When you look again . . ." (11).

She returns to the image of the stage in "Northing." Here in rather elaborate and fanciful description is what she sees around her:

> In the general litter and scramble of these woods, the small grazed hollow looked very old, like the site of druidical rites, or like a theatrical set, with the pool at centre stage, and the stand of silver saplings the audience in thrall. There at the pool lovers would meet in various guises, and there Bottom in his ass's head would bleat at the reflection of the moon. (250)

Perhaps her best description of the audience and, more specifically, the interaction between audience and writer occurs in a chapter in which the author does not specifically mention the audience at all. Welty offers a reading of one of Dillard's descriptions with this in mind:

> The relationship between the writer and the reader is fully as peculiar and astonishing as the emergence of the polyphemus moth. It too has got

> to leave the cocoon, has got to draw breath and assume every risk of being alive before the next step, real understanding, can take place. (5)

There is another passage, however, which Welty does cite but not in this regard which makes a much stronger statement about writing. Welty offers this section of Pilgrim as an example of Dillard's ability to write "straight narrative." While it certainly is that, it is also much more. What we have here, I would suggest, is a metaphor for how writer and reader work together, even on the brink of chaos, to construct order and meaning. What we have here is a striking representation of the cooperation that must exist between writer and reader if successful writing and reading are to take place, tasks which we have seen at once demand all work yet, thankfully, embrace noticeable play:

> I walk along a low brick wall that was built to retain the creek away from the house at high water. The wall holds just fine, but now that the creek's receding, it's retaining water around the house. On the wall I can walk right out into the flood and stand in the middle of it. Now on the return trip I meet a young man who's going in the opposite direction. The wall is one brick wide; we can't pass. So we clasp hands and lean out backwards over the turbulent water; our feet

interlace like teeth on a zipper, we pull
together, stand, and continue on our ways. (155)

Chapter III

"Choosing the Given": Reader Role Construction in Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters

Following the publication of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1974), Annie Dillard offered readers her small collection of poetry, Tickets for a Prayer Wheel (1974), which in turn was followed by Holy the Firm (1977), a slim volume dealing specifically with the events of an arbitrarily chosen weekend and more broadly with human suffering. Next to appear was a statement on her approach to the written world of imagination, Living by Fiction (1982), which Dillard herself later called "an extremely dull book of unlicensed literary theory" ("Making Contact" 622). However, not until her fifth book, Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters (1982), did Dillard return to Pilgrim's familiar territory of exploration and expression in landscape and language.

Like some of the chapters of Pilgrim, portions of Teaching a Stone to Talk had been published previously in periodicals including Antaeus, Atlantic Monthly, Christian Science Monitor, Harper's, The Living Wilderness, Potomac, Self, and The Yale Literary Magazine. In the author's note to Teaching a Stone to Talk, Dillard tells us that

> Some of these have not been published before; others, such as "Living like Weasels" and "The

> Deer at Providencia," were published obscurely. At any rate, this is not a collection of occasional pieces, such as a writer brings out to supplement his real work; instead this is my real work, such as it is.

John B. Breslin finds in this statement "a characteristic blend of self-assurance and diffidence" and judges this book to be "the one most like her Pulitzer Prize-winning first" (355). It is interesting to note that Dillard skirts the issue here of labelling just what "these" pieces are; rather she hastens to clarify what they are not. Wade Hancock classifies two in particular ("An Expedition to the Pole" and "Life on the Rocks") as "prose meditations." A New Yorker reviewer labels the works "pensées." Letha Dawson Scanzoni calls the collection "narratives," a label Dillard herself uses in a later article ("Making Contact" 622). I am content to call them essays, as I cannot think of another collection of modern pieces that so fully embodies in both form and content the sense of striving to which the term borrowed from the French attests--a striving that approaches, as this particular title suggests, even the impossible.

This collection of fourteen essays, one less than Pilgrim's fifteen chapters, recalls many of the images and reintroduces many of the themes developed in the earlier book. The geographical scope of the second is much wider,

however. Whereas Pilgrim focuses on the events and realizations surrounding one small creek in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, Teaching a Stone to Talk offers settings as diverse as Antarctica, the Galápagos Islands, the Ecuadorian jungle, and a hilltop hear Yakima, Washington. The subtitle, Expeditions and Encounters, suggests that as readers once again we will be asked to read within the conventions of the travel narrative.

Dillard's prose offers us a perspective on places that we may not likely see for ourselves and, not surprisingly, in her recounting she continues to probe the act of seeing. "I stood on the island's ocean shore," she says in "An Expedition to the Pole," "and saw what there was to see: a pile of colorless stripes" (42). This is a recasting of what we find in the beginning of a section in Pilgrim's first chapter: "Like the bear who went over the mountain, I went out to see what I could see. And, I might as well warn you, like the bear, all that I could see was the other side of the mountain: more of same" (11). Here we have a reissuing of not only the earlier work's ideas, but its wording and sentence structure as well. We find another similar statement in "In the Jungle": "The point of going somewhere like the Wapo River in Ecuador is not to see the most spectacular anything. It is simply to see what is there."

This passage is followed by an observation that sounds as if it could easily have come from Pilgrim: "We are here on the planet only once, and might as well get a feel for the place" (55). It reminds readers of the earlier text of some of the comments on infants and sight which are recounted in "Seeing" and which are also touched on again in the later collection of essays. "You see things only by their effects," Dillard tells us in "The Jungle," and speaking of the high Arctic she says, "I saw what newborn babies must see: nothing but senseless variations of light on the retinas" (58, 43). Her image early on in Pilgrim of a baby trying to determine his whereabouts comes to mind as well and remains one of the most endearing and poignant frames of Pilgrim:

> An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn't the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he'll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why.

(11-12)

This preceding image, combined with the quest for "[e]xperiencing the present purely" (80) which becomes the main focus of Pilgrim's chapter "The Present," is also of concern in the later essay "Total Eclipse":

> We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up. We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust. As adults we are almost all adept at waking up. We have so mastered the transition we have forgotten we ever learned it. Yet it is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many will-less dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge. We live half our waking lives and all of our sleeping lives in some private, useless, and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add--until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into the wide-awake city, in a form that people can use. (97-98)

Two other images that are used repeatedly in both texts are the carnival and, more extensively, the explorer. In Pilgrim's first chapter Dillard refers to "[s]ome sort of carnival magician" and observes that "By five-thirty the show had pulled out" (11). In Teaching a Stone to Talk in

her discussion of "Mirages," she remarks similarly that "the show pulled out" (146); and, in "An Expedition to the Pole," she refers to a congregation as "dancing bears [who] have dressed ourselves in buttoned clothes . . . [who] mince around the rings on two feet" (146, 19). She announces, "I am an explorer," in Pilgrim's first chapter, and throughout Teaching a Stone to Talk we see her assuming this role as well. Not only does she herself function as explorer, she recounts in considerable detail the experiences of a number of well-known explorers.

Her perceptions of their journeys, as well as her own, are infused with a sense of the mystical. Speaking of those who ventured out before her in "An Expedition to the Pole," Dillard says, "They went . . . partly in search of the sublime, and they found it the only way it can be found, here or there--around the edges, tucked into the corners of the days" (29). The relationship of humankind to the planet they explore and inhabit is also dealt with in both texts, and the author insists in each instance that it is only appropriate that the exploration be conducted with a sense of wonder and celebration. In one of the final images of Pilgrim she concludes, "If I am a maple key falling, at least I can twirl" (268). The last paragraph of her essay "Sojourner"--a synonym, appropriately, for "pilgrim"--uses new imagery to assert essentially the same thing:

> The planet is less like an enclosed spaceship--spaceship earth--than it is like an exposed mangrove island beautiful and loose. We the people started small and have since accumulated a great and solacing muck of soil, of human culture. We are rooted in it; we are bearing it with us across nowhere. The word "nowhere" is our cue: the consort of musicians strikes up, and we in the chorus stir and move and start twirling our hats. A mangrove island turns drift to dance. It creates its own soil as it goes, rocking over the salt sea at random, rocking day and night and round the sun, rocking round the sun and out toward east of Hercules. (152)

Another similarity to Pilgrim that one finds in Teaching a Stone to Talk is the author's liberal use of borrowed material. The essays, once again, become a composite of what Dillard has observed in the world and in the printed word. What she has read is imbedded in her own text. We are asked to read what she has read, and her work becomes a scrapbook and we the browsers in this personal anthology. She refers once again to Ernest Thompson Seton and Martin Buber and actually insists that her readers "Read C. H. Waddington, The Strategy of the Genes, and Arthur Koestler, The Ghost in the Machine" (120). As readers we are more used to encountering a gentler form of suggestion,

such as, "You only have to read . . . in order to see . . ." or the more familiar, "According to . . ." which in effect suggests to the reader, "If you took the time to find and read this you would agree with the conclusions I draw." Dillard's unapologetic command to "Read" strikes us with its boldness and assertiveness. She might just as easily command us, we surmise, to "Stand," "Sit," or "Roll over." Such assumed authority on the one hand suggests a writer with a great deal of confidence in herself and comfort with her audience. On the other hand, it testifies to a writer with a sense of humour and a love of the idiosyncratic. We hear the same speaker elsewhere, for example, give advice to a young companion: "listen to no one" (170). Clearly, such contradictions delight rather than confound the reader who by now has been conditioned to expect as much from this author with a penchant for paradox, who claims to have been raised, after all, in the midst of an ongoing discussion of "every technical, theoretical, and moral aspect of the art [of humour]" (An American Childhood 50).

Sometimes Dillard's borrowings pass uncited, as when she says, "'You cannot kill time,' I read once, 'without injuring eternity,'" and other times the source of the borrowing is unmistakable (159). As amply seen in Pilgrim, Teaching a Stone to Talk includes several references to Thoreau both directly and by allusion. Echoes of the Concord native's "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" can

be heard when Dillard writes, "I come to Hollins Pond not so much to learn how to live as, frankly, to forget about it" (15).[1] Despite the attempts at a disclaimer, however, her observations inevitably lead her to propose various strategies to ensure a life not squandered. "The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain and skilled and supple way," she attests, "to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting." And she ends this essay on "Living Like Weasels" with this call to commitment:

> I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you're going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and

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[1] In what must surely be one of the most quoted passages from Thoreau we read, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau: Walden and Other Writings. Ed. Joseph Wood Krutch. New York: Bantam Books, 1962: 172).

> scatter, loosened over fields, over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles. (16)

In addition to "reading about weasels" (12), Dillard tells us that her reading includes "comparative cosmology" (71), an article on gold mining (87), John Updike's story "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car" (134), an article in Scientific American (144), and instructions on jumping from moving trains (160), all of which yield images and information for her essays. When discussing the Galápagos hawk, for example, she tells us, "I have read that if you take pains, you can walk up and pat it" (114); and later she says, "I have read, and repeated, that our solar system as a whole is careering through space toward a point east of Hercules" (151). Her borrowings include popular as well as literary sources. She ends "Life of the Rocks: the Galápagos" with four lines from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and elsewhere borrows a handful of symbols from James Joyce's short story "Araby." A yard complete with bicycle, a bicycle pump in need of maintenance, and an apple tree provide the setting for a section of the essay, "Aces and Eights." She calls to mind Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass when she asks, "What shall we sing, while the fire burns down?" and answers, "I will sing you the Galápagos islands, the sea lions soft on the rocks" (130).

Her biblical borrowings and allusions, though not as numerous as those in Pilgrim, still range from Genesis to Revelation. She compares the greeting of the sea lions to what "the first creatures must have given Adam--a hero's welcome, a universal and undeserved huzzah" (115). She asserts that "The earth, without form, is void" (128). "And the rocks themselves shall be moved" suggests the events surrounding the opening of the sixth seal in the sixth chapter of Revelation: "and every mountain and island were moved out of their places" (129). Equally apocalyptic language is used when Dillard talks about her adventures with the microscope which doomed her minute subjects on the slide: "Over and over again, the last trump sounded, the final scroll unrolled" (106). Her essay on the weasel includes an elaborate fantasy based on King Nebuchadnezzar's madness as described in the fourth chapter of Daniel. Dillard says, "I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses." She even carves a place for her readers in these imaginings by shifting her choice of pronoun: "Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses" (15). Another perhaps less easily recognizable biblical allusion (at least I must confess to being puzzled by this one on my first few readings) occurs

as early as the first essay's second page where she describes steers standing in Hollins Pond and notes that "from the distant shore they look like miracle itself, complete with miracle's nonchalance." The allusion here, I think, must be to Christ's walking on the water as recounted in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew. The form of address and syntax of the sentence, "Gentlemen of the city, what surprises you?" mimics "Ye men of Galilee why stand ye gazing . . .?" of the first chapter of Acts (64). And finally, the actual title of one of her essays, "On a Hill Far Away," appropriates the openings words of what is probably the most well-known gospel hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross."

What is at once laudable and refreshing about Dillard's use of biblical imagery is the literary integrity she maintains while employing it. While we are accustomed to such care being taken by the writers of poetry and fiction, essayists, perhaps because of what is generally perceived as the close proximity existing between the author and speaker in this genre, have tended to be less successful at separating the use of biblical imagery from didactic purposes. Dillard refuses to sacrifice imagination to indoctrination. In privileging the artistic over the evangelical, she is able to speak clearly and forcibly to her primary audience whom she identifies in an early interview with Philip Yancey: "I am consciously addressing

the unbeliever in my books . . ." (14). She is not oblivious to a radically different audience whom she recalls rather whimsically in an interview with Karla Hammond: "While I was originally writing Pilgrim I thought, for some reason, that I would have exactly forty-three readers. And I thought that they would all be monks. In fact, an enormous number of monks do read Pilgrim; nuns and monks write me letters" (32).[2]

It is not surprising that Dillard's prose elicits actual responses from her readers, for perhaps more than most, this essayist labours over locating her readers within her prose. One of the most obvious techniques she uses for accomplishing this is direct address. In a discussion of the behaviour of penguins and tourists she asks, "What are the chances that God finds our failed impersonation of human dignity adorable? Or is he fooled? What odds do you give me (42)?" And in her recounting of achieving with a weasel what sounds like a Vulcan mind-meld from Star Trek, Dillard

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[2] And they are not the only ones. Dillard begins her article, "Making Contact," with these words: "When you publish a book, people send you surprising letters." What follows in the article is a delightful and at times barely believable catalogue of requests and confessions, responses and presents that come from the author's at times all-too-real audience.

addresses her readers directly:

> Please do not tell me about "approach-avoidance conflicts." I tell you I've been in that weasel's brain for sixty seconds, and he was in mine. Brains are private places, muttering through unique and secret tapes--but the weasel and I both plugged into another tape simultaneously, for a sweet and shocking time. Can I help it if it was a blank? What goes on in his brain the rest of the time? What does a weasel think about? He won't say. (14-15)

What is perhaps most interesting about the beginning of this particular section in terms of the audience's role is that the speaker does not actually give us our lines but instead tells us which ones we should not bother delivering. "Please do not tell me," she begins, anticipating our response and editing it before we can deliver it.

Another place in her essays where she addresses us directly and invites response takes place, ironically, in the recounting of an experience in which the writer herself wrestles with her own varied responses in a church service that falls far short of her tastes in worship. She borrows from travel imagery once again, which, as readers, we are now very comfortable with and asks, "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" Several lines later she

continues: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it (40)?" Our response, at best, may well be that which she offers in Pilgrim, following similar queries from another writer: "It's a good question" (7). At any rate, it keeps us in the dialogue.

It is not only through her questioning that the writer creates a space for us as readers. Frequently she positions us within the text by including us in the particular scene or musing of the moment. Sometimes this is done in the context of a hypothetical situation. For example, in discussing her encounter with the weasel she says, "If you and I looked at each other that way, our skulls would split and drop to our shoulders" (14). At other times she creates a space for us by shifting her narration from the exclusively first person. In recounting the childhood adventure where she and some others were taken to the top of a mountain by Mr. Noah Very, she recalls: "The ledge overhangs the next valley so far that you have to look behind you, between your feet, to see the stream far below" (155). Such a simple accommodation in pronoun requires that we position ourselves within the recollection, however fleetingly. Often we are in the picture in one frame, and then out of it the next. Another place where this happens is in her essay "In the Jungle." The opening sentence creates a space for us: "Like any out-of-the-way place, the

Napo River in the Ecuadorian jungle seems real enough when you are there, even central," but within two sentences we are as easily erased with the words, "I was sitting on a stump" (emphasis mine). Dillard elsewhere describes nature as "very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair . . . . like one of those line drawings of a tree that are puzzles for children" (Pilgrim 16-17). As an audience we might be tempted at times to describe ourselves and our roles within her prose in similar terms.

In her description of the "Total Eclipse," Dillard says, "I pray you will never see anything more awful in the sky." The paragraph immediately following this contains what may well be the longest sentence in this collection of essays. What is more interesting than its size is the repetition of the assertion "you see":

> You see the wide world swaddled in darkness; you see a vast breadth of hilly land, and an enormous, distant, blackened valley; you see towns' lights, a river's path, and blurred portions of your hat and scarf; you see your husband's face looking like an early black-and-white film; and you see a sprawl of black sky and blue sky together, with unfamiliar stars in it, some barely visible bands of cloud, and over there, a small white ring. (95 emphasis mine)

It is rhetorically interesting that the writer places us in a situation that she describes as terrifying--"I have said that I heard screams"--and then uses language that precludes our turning away or even closing our eyes (100). Where we might expect to find an invitation to participate as audience, we find instead a directive repeated and repeated. The fictionalizing here demands that we see what the speaker has seen or at least as the speaker has seen. The reference "your husband" carries with it a gender specific role and because we are told that the speaker was accompanied by her husband on this occasion, our looking through her eyes becomes more than a convenient metaphor. The invitation the writer essentially delivers here is "be me."

One of the major differences that a reader of both books notices is that the essays in Teaching a Stone to Talk are more populated than those found in Pilgrim. Dillard uses these additional characters at times to assist in the creation of different roles for the reader. These new roles can be deceptively simple or intriguingly complex. In "On a Hill Far Away," for example, the bulk of the essay focuses on the writer's encounter with a neighbourhood lad whose deliberate speech patterns and determination to engage her in extended conversations lead her to describe him as "a kid in a book" (82). This simple classification places us as readers in a hall of mirrors. Indeed, this child is just that to us--a kid in a book. He is the kid in an essay

midway through the book Teaching a Stone to Talk. But because we are led to believe that the narrator has given the child this designation at the time of their encounter and not later upon reconstructing it, he becomes for us a kid in at least two books and perhaps even a kid spanning all of children's literature. While the writer engages with him as an individual, she also, by her own admission, constructs him as a character. This in turn makes her a reader within her own narrative and we as audience become co-readers with her. It is a clever reversal of what is usually asked of us. As writer, we expect Dillard to create a place for us as readers to inhabit; in this instance, she asks us as readers to move over, as it were, to make a space for the writer as reader.[3]

More often the invitation to don a mask or to shift roles as readers comes in more conventional ways. In the essay on Arctic exploration we are addressed as "[i]f you

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[3] Something similar happens in "Total Eclipse" where once again she pictures the real in terms of the representation. In this essay she describes Mount Adams as "an enormous, snow-covered volcanic cone rising flat, like so much scenery" (88). Not only does this appeal to the reader and writer's shared fondness for novelty, it also raises once again questions of perception which seem never far from the core of Dillard's concerns.

are Peary" or "[i]f you are an officer." She also asks us to consider what we might have done "if, in the dead of winter, 1819, one had been a member of young Edward Parry's expedition," or what it might have been like "[i]f one had been frozen" (29-30). In "Total Eclipse" she makes what at first appears to be a passing reference to an article on gold mining, but the imagery comes back to fire her imagination and ours as she reflects through metaphor upon the gravity of surrendering to the mystery of the unknown:

> What if you regain the surface and open your sack and find, instead of treasure, a beast which jumps at you? Or you may not come back at all. The winches may jam, the scaffolding buckle, the air conditioning collapse. You may glance up one day and see by your headlamp the canary keeled over in its cage. You may reach into a cranny for pearls and touch a moray eel. You yank on your rope; it is too late. (102)

Elsewhere she asks us to consider ourselves "wind, spindrift, sunlight, leaves" and even "a mangrove" which is "likely to drift anywhere in an alien ocean, feeding on death and growing, netting a makeshift soil as it goes, shrimp in its toes and terns in its hair." Then with a magician-quick flick of the wrist she pulls the watery rug out from under us with "We could do worse" (113, 150). This achieves the same sort of abrupt re-entry or radical

channel-changing with us as when she says earlier, speaking of various poses of worship, "You do not have to do these things; not at all . . . . You do not have to do these things--unless you want to know God. They work on you, not on him" (31).

Dillard's shifts between several levels of reality, or multiple stages of unreality, produce quite the challenge at times for the reader seeking to locate himself in all that passes before him. Sometimes what he is offered is a giant surreal collage or a dreamlike grand finale where the entire cast has been assembled. Dillard does this most effectively and most sustainedly in what is, not surprisingly, the most complex essay of her collection, "An Expedition to the Pole." She gives us the setting, "clumped on an ice floe drifting over the black polar sea," and then the party begins:

> I am wearing, I discover, the uniform of a Keystone Kop. I examine my hat: a black cardboard constable's hat with a white felt star stapled to the band above the brim. My dark Keystone Kop jacket is nicely belted, and there is a tin badge on my chest. A holster around my hips carries a pop gun with a cork on a string, and a red roll of caps. My feet are bare, but I feel no cold. I am skating around on the ice, and singing, and bumping into people who, because the

ice is slippery, bump into other people. "Excuse me!" I keep saying, "I beg your pardon woops there!"

When a crack develops in our floe and opens at my feet, I jump across it--skillfully, I think--but my jump pushes my side of the floe away, and I wind up leaping full tilt into the water. The Chinese man extends a hand to pull me out, but alas, he slips and I drag him in. The Chinese man and I are treading water, singing, and collecting a bit of a crowd. It takes a troupe of circus clowns to get us both out. I check my uniform at once and learn that my rather flattering hat is intact, my trousers virtually unwrinkled, but my roll of caps is wet. The Chinese man is fine; we thank the clowns.

This troupe of circus clowns, I hear, is poorly paid. They are invested in bright, loose garments; they are a bunch of spontaneous, unskilled, oversized children; they joke and bump into people. At one end of the flow, ten of them--red, yellow, and blue--are trying to climb up on each other to make a human pyramid. It is a wonderfully funny sight, because they have put the four smallest clowns on the bottom, and the biggest, fattest clown is trying to climb to the

> top. The rest of the clowns are doing gymnastics; they tumble on the ice and flip cheerfully in midair. Their crucifixes fly from their ruffled necks as they flip, and hit them on their bald heads as they land. Our floe is smaller now, and we seem to have drifted into a faster bit of current. Repeatedly we ram little icebergs, which rock as we hit them. Some of them tilt clear over like punching bags; they bounce back with great splashes, and water streams down their blue sides as they rise. The country-and-western-style woman is fending off some of the larger bergs with a broom. The lugs with the mustaches have found, or brought, a Frisbee, and a game is developing down the middle of our flow. Near the Frisbee game, a bunch of people including myself and some clowns are running. We fling ourselves down on the ice, shoulders first, and skid long distances.
>
> Now the music ceases and we take our seats in the pews. A baby is going to be baptized. Overhead the sky is brightening; I do not know if this means we have drifted farther north, or all night. (34-36)

Where are we as readers in this co(s)mic free-for-all? She does not specifically locate us on the iceberg with her

merry band. We are not in the water--we long since should have perished--nor do we seem to be near by on some parallel berg. The scene seems to offer us the opportunity of looking down from above or across another dimension. Here, hitherto unbeknown to us, Dillard has led us in what may be the ultimate act of fictionalizing. "What are the chances that God finds our failed impersonations of human dignity adorable?" Dillard asks later on in the essay (42). If we have accepted this role and watched the show, we can venture an answer.

Dillard leaves little doubt as to how she would answer the question. Much earlier in the same essay she chronicles a congregation's bungling attempts at corporate worship and concludes, "A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we still have not worked out the kinks." Nevertheless, she concludes, "Week after week Christ washes the disciples' dirty feet, handles their very toes, and repeats, It is all right--believe it or not--to be people" (20).

The ice flow scene does not "limit" us to an omniscient role, however. In this scene Dillard successfully creates a dual role for us, refusing to singularly place us in the scene as either spectators or participants. There is the unmistakable air of familiarity about the whole enterprise which we as an audience recognize as a parody of the human

condition. And with this recognition comes our inclusion whether we like it or not.

The comedy in Dillard's scene works several ways. We laugh, if indeed we do laugh, with the participants because they represent us. We laugh at them, too, from the vantage point of the celestial box seats that Dillard offers us. The scene allows us to be both in the action and to transcend the action, and in this retelling of the divine comedy Dillard brilliantly reasserts her conviction, "God with us."

Elsewhere in this same essay Dillard pictures the congregation as dancing bears who have trouble playing the parts that have been assigned to them and whose "bearness" keeps breaking through. She offers a number of different roles, too, to aid the reader in understanding the experience she is relating. She suggests, for example, that witnessing an eclipse is "like dying," "like the death of someone," "like slipping into fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering" (84). She describes fellow participants gathered to witness the eclipse appearing "as though we had all gathered on hilltops to pray for the world on its last day." The group also appears to her "as though we had all crawled out of spaceships and were preparing to assault the valley below." As readers we are asked to fictionalize those we are viewing, or have already fictionalized in another way. In a

sense it is fictionalizing raised to another power, or refictionalizing. Dillard fictionalizes the group she is a part of and, as viewers of a group assembled for the purpose of viewing, we readjust our perspective as required. Another scenario Dillard suggests is the group "scattered on hilltops at dawn to sacrifice virgins, make rain, set stone stelae in a ring" (89).

Dillard is not content to leave her readers with a visual sense alone of this event. She strives to represent for them the magnitude of its impact and in one of her most successful visceral images she compares it with "feeling a slug of anesthetic shoot up your arm. If you think very fast," she continues, "you may have time to think, 'Soon it will hit my brain.' You can feel the deadness race up your arm; you can feel the appalling, inhuman speed of your own blood" (100).

In "Life on the Rocks" she sets us up as witnesses to evolution, as reporters, bystanders, or cosmic strollers. In the essay's opening paragraph she reflects on how we work through simile and metaphor, seeking to frame the unknown in terms of the known:

> First there was nothing, and although you know with your reason that nothing is nothing, it is easier to visualize it as a limitless slosh of sea--say, the Pacific. Then energy contracted into matter, and although you know that even an

> invisible gas is matter, it is easier to visualize it as a massive squeeze of volcanic lava spattered inchoate from the secret pit of the ocean and hardening mute and intractable on nothing's lapping shore--like a series of islands, an archipelago. Like: the Galápagos. (110)

Learning as readers to visualize new roles in terms of more familiar ones is made easier for us by Dillard's skill in similarly framing much of her description. In Teaching a Stone to Talk, the opaque lake and river waters are described to us as "veils, blinds, painted screens" (58). She tells us that "night smelled sweet, more moistened and sweet than any kitchen, or garden, or cradle" (54). The eclipse occurs "hauling darkness like plague behind it" (100). The universe is pictured as threatening to "veer from its orbit amok like a car out of control on a turn" (101). The hillside is described as "a nineteenth-century tinted photograph from which the tints had faded." The whole experience strikes the writer as standing in "a faded color print of a movie filmed in the Middle Ages" (91). The small ring of light looked "like a ridiculous lichen up in the sky, like a perfectly still explosion 4,200 light-years away" (96). At times Dillard creates a scene by describing what it is not. We are told, for example, that the eclipse began with "no starting gun, no overture, no introductory speaker" (89). She even applauds someone else's image for

what was seen, calling the college student who compared the sight with a "Life Saver" a "walking alarm clock" (98).

Often her descriptions involve depicting the natural world and its processes in terms of the unnatural or manmade. In the book's opening paragraph, she relates a naturalist's encounter with a weasel where the latter had to be soaked off "like a stubborn label." In the same essay where she describes the area, we are introduced to the striking coexistence of the two worlds:

> This is, mind you, suburbia. It is a five-minute walk in three directions to rows of houses, though none is visible here. There's a 55 mph highway at one end of the pond, and a nesting pair of wood ducks at the other. Under every bush is a muskrat hole or a beer can. The far end is an alternating series of fields and woods, fields and woods, threaded everywhere with motorcycle tracks--in whose bare clay wild turtles lay eggs. (12-13)

Such depictions refuse to allow writer or reader to become overly sentimental about nature. What Dillard sees is what we get. On her weekend in the country, for example, it is the wild with a box of groceries. As I read, I cannot help but notice a cozy symmetry here. From the vantage point of my computer in my North York basement, I look up and through the window see black squirrels racing along the

power lines. I feed Virgil each morning before I start to work. He is the neighbourhood's wild cat who, though he will not be tamed, will accept Cat Chow and fresh water in margarine containers. Dillard shows us nature red in tooth and tricycle; it is nature bearing humankind's monogram.

Despite her incredible power of description, Dillard concedes how essentially inadequate and limiting all comparisons are when she admits that a sight such as the eclipse really "had nothing to do with anything" (96). That the very act of writing involves entering the realm of fiction no matter what genre is on the drawing board, is always foremost in Dillard's concern as she creates. She recognizes that the process of writing involves a myriad of interwoven choices concerning what to put in, what to leave out, what to change, what to invent in order to arrive at what one perceives as truth. Experiencing the present purely, Dillard has argued before, is an act that requires as much undoing as doing, and achieving a transcription of that present is the labour of a lifetime. "The mind--the culture--has two little tools," she claims, "grammar and lexicon: a decorated sand bucket and a matching shovel. With these we bluster about the continents and do all the world's work. With these we try to save our very lives" (99).

She draws our attention as readers to these very tools and to the choices her writing forces her to make. In the

title essay she calls herself a "crank," and in discussing a neighbour whom she decides also warrants the designation says, "I am protecting his (or her) privacy, and confusing for you the details. It could be, for instance, a pinch of sand he is teaching to talk, or a prolonged northerly, or any one of a number of waves. But it is, in fact I assure you, a stone" (67-68).

In such writerly asides Dillard comments on her own craft and through a combination of earnestness and slight of hand she manages to keep her readers both challenged and chuckling. We are about the planet's business, she tells us, we are trying to save lives, but let us never forget that we are also just playing at the beach.

Another intrusion into the narrative occurs in "Aces and Eights" where she says,

> Here a concern for truth forces me to confess that although I am writing in the present tense, actually some years have elapsed since this weekend in the country. In the course of those years, Noah Very has died. He died of a stroke, and, sadly, was not mourned by kin. His death, of course, makes me recall him with more fondness than I felt for him while he lived, for in truth he was a grouch who despised everyone. (170)

When she does this sort of thing, Dillard is shifting voices slightly from the raconteur who invents and rearranges in

her myth-making to the botanist who watches the plant unfold and sketches what she sees from a safe enough distance so as not to interfere with the organism under scrutiny. As readers we must make some accommodations as well. The one writerly pose never lets us lose sight of the subject for long, whereas the other privileges the object and seeks to keep our focus directed there.

Dillard deliberately undermines her own narrative a number of times in these essays. She consciously breaks the fiction of the immediate present when she says, "Two years have passed since the total eclipse of which I write" (85). She calls into question too the capriciousness and reliability of recall. In "Living Like Weasels" she laments, "This was only last week, and already I don't know what shattered the enchantment" (14), and speaking of palo santo trees in "Life on the Rocks" she says,

> my memories of them had altered, the way memories do, like particolored pebbles rolled back and forth over a grating, so that after a time those hard bright ones, the ones you thought you would never lose, have vanished, passed through the grating, and only a few big, unexpected ones remain, no longer unnoticed but now selected out for some meaning, large and unknown. (74)

She ponders aloud about memory, too, when she recalls a painting that she would just as soon forget:

> It was a painting of the sort which you do not intend to look at, and which, alas, you never forget. Some tasteless fate presses it upon you; it becomes part of the complex interior junk you carry with you wherever you go. Two years have passed since the total eclipse of which I write. During those years I have forgotten, I assume, a great many things I wanted to remember--but I have not forgotten that clown painting or its lunatic setting in the old hotel. (85)

Several times Dillard draws our attention to the artifice of what she as a writer is about. "There are a few more things to tell from this level, the level of the restaurant," she says in "Total Eclipse"; and in "God in the Doorway" she says, "This is really a story about Miss White" (99, 140). A similar admission occurs in "Lenses" when she says, "But oddly, this is a story about swans. It is not even a story; it is a description of swans" (106). Here she presents herself as a self-conscious creator, making decisions as she goes, leaving her trail behind her described in Pilgrim as "this book . . . the straying trail of blood" (12).

A fascinating tension exists between what Dillard decides to give us and what she chooses to withhold. This is shown most dramatically in two very different scenes in her essays. "Aces and Eights," she tells us, is the poker

hand that Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was shot in the back, and she uses this image, "'dead man's hand,'" to represent the human condition (162). In this same essay, which is built around the speaker's weekend in the country spent with a favourite child, our attention is focused on a seemingly innocent prop of cottage life. She reproduces for us a note taped to the icebox door, left, obviously, by a former tenant: "'Matches in the tin box on mantel. Do not eat purple berries from bush by porch. Bulbs of creek grass OK, good boiled. Blue berries in woods make you sick'" (157). Such instructions annoy her and she attributes them to "grouches with sour stomachs, and hoaxers" (158). She is not interested in being fed by the land quite so literally, and if she were, she tells us, she would choose to find these things out firsthand.

In a sense, this same essay and all of the others become the note taped to the icebox door. In them Dillard tells us important things that she has discovered, things that we as sojourners would be better off knowing, things that not knowing might cause us pain. She admits readily that she herself does not take kindly to this sort of advice, much like the "listen to no one" advice she gives the little girl, but she concedes that our compulsion to offer and reject this sort of thing is an integral part of the weave and wonder of us (180). She falls prey to the urge herself before the weekend is over when she muses,

"Will the next generation of people remember to drain the pipes in fall?" and decides, "I will leave them a note" (169-70).

An example of the opposite behaviour, deliberately withholding, is found in "The Deer at Providencia." In a discussion of human suffering she reproduces for us parts of a press clipping that she keeps fastened to the mirror and rereads every morning. It recounts a second, accidental, massive burning experienced by a man in Florida named Alan McDonald. Dillard tells us that she does not know if this man survived, but she says, "I wrote him a letter at the time, cringing" (65). She does not offer us a copy of this letter. She does not tell us what she said. I have found myself wishing at times that she would have, though I know that the veil of silence which she draws here is appropriate. It goes beyond etiquette and acknowledging that we really have no business reading someone else's mail. It is in keeping with the overarching theme of silence that informs many of the essays, and in particular "A Field of Silence."

The illustrations of the note on the icebox and the clipping on the mirror demonstrate more than the tension between giving and withholding that we find in Teaching a Stone to Talk. A large part of the appeal of "Aces and Eights" is the sweet and gentle tolerance the writer exhibits for inconsistencies. Sometimes she tackles this

overtly by layering her essays with examples supporting this theme, and other times she reinforces this idea through tone and style. The writer, we have noted, is dismissive of the note-writer she encounters, and yet she gives in to the same impulse herself. She determines early on not to go on this holiday, and yet she does. She admonishes the child, "never listen to the same conversation twice," and yet by engaging us in the reading of her work she makes it impossible for us as readers to heed that advice (170). She tackles this most directly when she says in one of my favourite passages in this collection, "Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand--that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us" (30). Visually the same notion is represented in the bizarre hotel room portrait that she recalls:

> The clown's glance was like the glance of Rembrandt in some of the self-portraits: lovely, knowing, deep, and loving. The crinkled shadows around his eyes were string beans. His eyebrows were parsley. Each of his ears was a broad bean. His thin, joyful lips were red chili peppers; between his lips were wet rows of human teeth and a suggestion of a real tongue. The clown print was framed in gilt and glassed. (85)

Dillard seems early on to have reached George Santayana's conclusion: "This world is contingency and

absurdity incarnate" (56). Indeed much of her writing, though never shying away from the most serious of themes, still finds room to celebrate the comic. As an audience we soon realize that what we are called upon to view will contain elements of the tragic and the comic and that at times the writer will find herself pleading with us, "Don't laugh. . . . Don't laugh; you'll make me laugh" (33).

Much of Dillard's comedy is verbal, as in "Nature's silence is its one remark, and every flake of world is a chip off that old mute and immutable block," and her observation that the eclipse "began with no ado" (69, 89). Equally as amusing is her occasional anthropomorphism such as when she pictures her drops of water under the microscope "excited by the heat . . . about their business until--as I fancied sadly--they all caught on to their situation and started making out wills" (106). Her section on people as penguins and penguins as people plays with this as well. The weight of decision-making is deftly deflated when in agonizing over whether or not to go away on a weekend trip with a child prone to nostalgia she reasons, "Who would subject a child to such suffering? On the other hand, maybe it would rain" (154). And the comedy of situation is celebrated when the old grouch of "Aces and Eights" actually gives his caller pleasure because unbeknown to him she "likes this feeling of being watched." There seems to be an element of poetic justice as well in the confirmation of his

status as "the valley's sole outlet for zucchini squash" (171-72).

Throughout the humorous passages of Teaching a Stone to Talk as well as throughout its more somber sections, Dillard consciously and continuously manipulates our gaze. At times we are asked to focus on the world as she sees it. At times we are asked to view ourselves as audience. At others we are invited to view the viewer. The speaker who directs our gaze has no aversion herself to being watched; she tells us in "The Deer at Providencia," "That night I learned that while we were watching the deer, the others were watching me" (63).

The theme of watching is one Dillard returns to again and again, and in one of these reflections the palo santo trees become for her the image of the ideal audience. She sees them in the Galápagos Islands as they "crowd the hillsides like any outdoor audience; they face the lagoons, the lava lowlands, and the shores" (73). She calls them "holy sticks, together watching all that we watch, and growing in silence" as they become to her "emblems of the muteness of the human stance in relation to all that is not human" (74). It is this silence that she most celebrates.

Hancock finds that Dillard "seems to be kicking against the limitations of her own style and of language in general to convey what she wants to share with us," and concludes that her task "is worthy of her talent; a task that is as

difficult as 'teaching a stone to talk.'" Indeed it can be no less for a writer who admits unequivocally that "silence . . . is all there is" (72). Helen Bevington claims that Dillard's title "explains something of her method"; she also finds in it the reminder, "we are here on this earth to witness."

This call to witness which pervades Teaching a Stone to Talk is issued by one who admits to a peculiar wish--"to come back as a palo santo tree on the weather side of an island, so that I could be, myself, a perfect witness and look, mute, and wave my arms" (76). Perhaps as readers such a lofty fiction is more than we can comfortably and confidently share. As readers and as participants in and recipients of what is being witnessed, Dillard leaves open a space for us to occupy. Indeed, in reading Dillard's text, we already have. With apologies to the New England bard,

> I'd like to go by climbing a palo santo tree
> And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
> Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
> But dipped its top and set me down again.
> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of palo santo trees.

Chapter IV

Collaboration, Accommodation, Exchange, and Barter": Information as Literature and its Audience in The Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail

A funny thing happened on the way to the 1974 National Book Awards. The judges in both the arts and letters panel and the science panel wished to honour the same book, Lewis Thomas's The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher. In the end the arts and letters panel had their way and a collection of twenty-nine short essays which first appeared in the "Medical Intelligence" section of The New England Journal of Medicine from 1971-1973 was awarded the top prize.

A sampling of the essay titles contained in this collection demonstrates the validity of the science panel's claim to Dr. Thomas's work: in addition to the title essay we find "A Fear of Pheromones," "The Technology of Medicine," "Organelles as Organisms," "Natural Science," and "The Planning of Science." Several other titles, including "The Music of This Sphere," "An Earnest Proposal," "Antaeus in Manhattan, "On Various Words," and "Living Language," suggest that the microscope is only one of the windows onto the world that fascinates this writer who, in addition to crafting the essay, has practised the vocations of physician, researcher, and medical administrator.

In functioning, often simultaneously, in these various roles, Dr. Thomas places himself in good company, for the doctor as writer has hardly been a stranger in the world of letters. Paul Gray includes St. Luke, John Arbuthnot, Anton Chekhov, Arthur Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham, Walker Piercy, Michael Crichton, Jonathan Miller, and Graham Chapman in his list. Edmund D. Pellegrino adds Thomas Browne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Richard Selzer, Rabelais, Crabbe, Smollett, Keats, Celine, Michaux, Breton, and Whitman to the list of those who, possessing either complete or partial medical training of their day, have come to be remembered primarily for their writing.

While the history of the doctor or scientist as writer is well established, the rise in the wider interest of domains commonly considered exclusive is particularly evident in the last few decades of this century. Aldous Huxley, writing in the sixties, makes an observation that is even more appropriate to the present. One cannot help but think of the immense popularity of Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time and Dr. Oliver Sacks' Awakenings and The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, to name just a few examples, when reading Huxley's observations:

> Progress in science has begotten progress in the popularization of science. Every year witnesses the publication of literally scores of surveys and bird's-eye views of all the sciences, of summaries

> of recent advances, digests of current modes of thinking. "Popular Science" is a new art form, partaking simultaneously of the textbook and the reportage, the philosophical essay and the sociological forecast. (61-62)

John Updike places Lewis Thomas in the company of such popularizers of science as Loren Eiseley, Desmond Morris, Annie Dillard, Joseph Wood Krutch, and H.G. Wells and refers to them as "a class of essayists . . . that seeks to acquaint us with the astonishing facts revealed by research and to place them in a perspective that we might call philosophical" (83). Fred D. White seeks to subdivide further the group of popularizers of science according to rhetorical purposes: "Just as there are different ways of interpreting scientific phenomena . . . there are different ways of writing scientifically." He observes that some writers "emphasize scientific content," and into this group he places Sir James Jeans, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, and writers for such journals as Scientific American. A second group, he says, emphasizes "human response," and here he places Thoreau, Muir, and Loren Eisely. The third group, into which he places Lewis Thomas, "strive[s] to balance scientific contents with human response" (33-34).

Joel Dana Black, in his work, develops another schema for differentiating between the types of scientific essays. He identifies three "socio-cultural functions" of the

scientific essay, and suggests that writers demonstrate observable predilections for one over the others. The first he calls a "popularizing-vulgarizing function," involving "introducing a naive or lay audience to the abstract complexities of advanced scientific theory and research." The second he calls the "moralizing-humanizing function," and claims that this uses science as a springboard for the "[transposition of] scientific issues into a different discursive register." The third function he describes as the "critically-revisionary mode." Here, according to Black, the writer primarily "challenges or interrogates established scientific doctrines" (135).

Black places Thomas in the second of his groups. If we grant that Thomas often indeed does "transpose scientific discourse into a different discursive register," and I believe this aptly describes a large part of his accomplishments, the questions remain, "What is characteristic of this new discursive register?" and "How does Thomas accomplish this transposition?" Even if we were to adequately answer these questions, it would still leave us with a fairly representative body of essays by Thomas that are not overtly about science. In addition to those essays on language mentioned earlier, one cannot ignore "Notes on Punctuation," "Why Montaigne Is Not a Bore" or for that matter "Heroin," the particularly powerful and controversial essay from the New England Journal of Medicine

that was not anthologized. These essays of Thomas are as important as his more overtly scientific essays, and while they may not necessarily demonstrate how Thomas transposes scientific discourse, they certainly attest to the writer's ability and willingness, at times, to try his hand at something else.

In the process of transposing scientific discourse into a different discursive register, Thomas presents the reader with information as literature. He accomplishes this primarily by using recognizable literary conventions in a context in which the reader is much less accustomed to encountering them. Thomas also enables his information to fit comfortably into the company of literature by refusing to perpetuate the fiction of the purely objective reporter. The voice we meet is distinctively his own and no matter what the topic, a strong sense of self emerges; cadences which soon become familiar are heard again and again. Thomas's references to the literary also help to dismantle any remaining notions an audience may harbour about the two cultures. And finally, the challenge presented by Thomas's construction of audience functions prophetically. It anticipates a higher level of scientific literacy while laying the groundwork for the actualization of that audience.

Turning first to Thomas's use of established, but in this context somewhat surprising, literary conventions, we

encounter his use of metaphor.[4] This is an ability of his species in which Thomas takes particular pride, noting as he does in "The Youngest and Brightest Thing Around" that "We are a spectacular, splendid manifestation of life. We have language and can build metaphors as skillfully and precisely as ribosomes make proteins" (Medusa 14). White credits much of Thomas's "readability" with the writer's "superb metaphor control" (35). He offers as an example the relative difficulty to the uninitiated of a concept such as "Pathogenicity is not the rule," and shows how Thomas makes it so much more accessible by saying, "Disease usually results from inconclusive negotiations for symbiosis," and "Our involvement is not that of an adversary in a straightforward game, but more like blundering into someone else's accident" ("Germs" Lives 76).

Virtually any Thomas essay will yield similar examples. The title essay of the first collection describes evolution

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[4] This is not to suggest that metaphor is restricted to literary language, but rather that metaphor is one of the tropes in which both the user and the recipient of literary language take particular delight. Indeed, it has been argued that inasmuch as all language is representative, the use of metaphor is inescapable. James L. Kinneavy discusses metaphor in the discourses of science, information, exploration, and persuasion in A Theory of Discourse (New York: Norton, 1971).

as "an infinitely long and tedious biologic game, with only the winners staying at the table" (5). Our fears about encountering extraterrestrial life forms are described in "Thoughts for a Countdown": "Whatever, once we have imagined it, foreign and therefore hostile, it is not to be petted. It must be locked up" (Lives 7). "An Earnest Proposal" describes symbiosis as "the nature of living things to pool resources" (Lives 29). We are told that we perceive "the ancient olfactory parts of the brain as though they were elderly, dotty relatives in need of hobbies" ("Vibes" Lives 39). And speaking of "The World's Biggest Membrane," the writer concedes, "It is hard to feel affection for something as totally impersonal as the atmosphere, and yet there it is, as much a part and product of life as wine or bread" (Lives 148).

In speaking about our curiosity and questions about life on earth, Thomas, in his own version of E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake," suggests that we "might begin at the local beach, which functions as a sort of ganglion." And in the same essay he enlarges his explanation of symbiosis, the term which Updike singles out as being Thomas's theme (83), by saying that in order to survive, the Marine Biology Laboratory at Woods Hole "will have to develop new symbiotic relations with the Oceanographic Institute" ("The MBL" Lives 61).

Though Thomas titles one of his essays "Societies as Organisms," it is the reverse perspective, "organisms as societies," that provides him with the source of many of his most graphic and effective metaphors. We tend to harbour a deadly fear of much of what we cannot see, Thomas tells us, but he is quick to offer the assurance, "Most bacteria are totally preoccupied with browsing" ("Germs" Lives 77). In the same essay, he describes our ability to protect ourselves from those invaders which might do us harm by saying, "We live in the midst of explosive devices; we are mined." He develops this metaphor further by claiming that "we will bomb, defoliate, blockade, seal off, and destroy all the tissues in the area" if we find ourselves in the least threatened (78). This process sometimes does us a great deal of harm, he asserts. "We are, in effect," he tells us, "at the mercy of our own Pentagons, most of the time" (80).

In addition to his use of metaphor in contributing an unmistakable literariness to his essays, as well as in explaining concepts that otherwise might be quite difficult to understand for the reader with a limited scientific background, Thomas frequently uses clever turns of phrase in his prose. He does this not only to convey meaning to his readers in the best possible and most memorable way, but also, it would seem, for the sheer delight of playing with language. In one such example Thomas suggests that we do

not sufficiently mourn our limited ability to access the wealth of information carried by individual odours. "We sometimes try to diminish our sense of loss (or loss of sense) by claiming to ourselves that we have put such primitive mechanisms behind us in our evolution," he says in "Vibes" (39). In another instance he demonstrates the pleasing results that can be achieved by occasionally and deliberately mixing levels of diction. He describes the development of a favourite spot, The Marine Biology Laboratory at Woods-Hole, Massachusetts, as "put together, given life, sustained into today's version of its maturity and prepared for further elaboration and changes in its complexity, by what can only be described as a bunch of people" ("The MBL" Lives 58). And in the same essay he knowingly and with tongue in cheek invites dismissal by most current literary and philosophical schools of thought by invoking the highly suspect T-word when he says, "Aplysia, a sea slug that looks as though it couldn't be good for anything, has been found by neurophysiologists to be filled with truth" (60).

Even though science is generally regarded as pretty serious stuff, Thomas is not above creating and enjoying a good joke now and then. These he delivers with the impeccable timing of a standup comic. Consider his remark in "On Cloning a Human Being." He says that this prospect "is on most of the lists of things to worry about from

Science, along with behavior control, genetic engineering, transplanted heads, computer poetry, and the unrestrained growth of plastic flowers" (Medusa 41). And in explaining the interrelatedness of many present day languages, Thomas suggests, "Using basic Indo-European and waving your hands, you could get around the world almost as well as with New York English" ("On Etymons and Hybrids" Medusa 46-47). In this same essay he accounts for the baggage carried around by one term this way: "'Thermodynamics,' first spoken a century ago, is an antique shop" (47). He describes the committee as "the most fundamental aspect of nature that we know about" ("The Youngest and Brightest Thing Around" Medusa 10).

Thomas's humorous observations are not confined to his second collection of essays. In The Lives of a Cell his musings about intergalactic eavesdropping all but invite scripting. Anticipating the problems involved in long distance conversations, Thomas notes, "By the time we have our party we may have forgotten what we had in mind. . . . In two hundred years it is, as we have found, easy to lose the thread" ("Vibes" 44-45). In speaking of telepathy and the absence of these sorts of experiences in his family, he says in mock lament, "It is discouraging to have had the wrong aunts, and never the ghost of a message" ("The Long Habit" 52). A domestic scene is created once again when, in discussing "Your Very Good Health," the good doctor wryly

shares a little known fact: "The great secret, known to internists and learned early in marriage by internists' wives, but still hidden from the general public is that most things get better by themselves. Most things, in fact, are better by morning" (85).

Thomas participates good-naturedly in a little inter-disciplinary rivalry when he admits that "Even 'physics,' save us, is a kind of 'nature,'" continuing to employ language as no small source of amusement (132). Particularly clever is his discussion of "the most famous and worst of the four-letter Anglo-Saxon unprintable words" which, incidentally, he names by deftly all but naming it; he playfully borrows obscenity's vernacular and the authority it invokes when he tells us to "Take that particular word" ("On Various Words" 137). Equally amusing is his reference in this essay to the imaginary arbitration of "a Middle English AMA" in trying to sort out the domain of "leech" and, in the final essay, his description of our inability to devise a way of improving the sky "beyond maybe shifting a local cloud from here to there on occasion" (138, 148).

In addition to his use of metaphor and the comic to declare the literariness of his work, Thomas as writer rejects the pose of the obscure and often anonymous staff writer commonly associated with the informative article. He takes, instead, as his mentor and inspiration Montaigne, and

subsequently develops a voice and a vision that are able to celebrate with equal felicity interdependence and individuality. This becomes apparent long before we encounter near the end of the second collection the full essay devoted to the celebrated essayist, "Why Montaigne is Not a Bore." The tag of "notes" on the cover, for instance, used originally in the name of Thomas's column ("Notes of a Biology Watcher") and then borrowed as subtitle for the collections, tells us something about the nature shared by his pieces and Montaigne's. "Notes" suggests to us that the essays are likely to be small, fragmentary, perhaps hurried, pieces of something else, points of departure, unordered, a step or stage in something larger.

Chris Anderson characterizes Thomas's notes as placing the conventions of information sharing and argumentation well behind the author's primary desire which is "to recreate and then reflect on his own experience and ideas." In so doing, Anderson continues, Thomas places himself in the tradition of Montaigne, Hazlitt, and E.B. White who also write "to tell the story of [their] thinking." Anderson describes Thomas as "a located speaker, located not only in a place and a time but in the now of the essay," stressing that Thomas's writing "issues from a self." He describes Thomas's process as "a thinking through of an important problem, much like freewriting, or like a journal entry, or like a conversation" (319-20).

Sometimes the conversation is with the self. Sometimes it spans the centuries. And sometimes it even manages to do both. In "The Youngest and Brightest Thing Around" Thomas says, "For our times of guilt we have Montaigne to turn to," and then offers us this three-hundred-year-old observation: "If it did not seem crazy to talk to oneself, there is not a day when I would not be heard growling at myself, 'Confounded fool'" (Medusa 14). Here we are introduced to the notion of the self which figures prominently in both writers. The statement also is reminiscent of Thomas's preoccupations with the value of error and ignorance as demonstrated in two other essays in Medusa, "The Wonderful Mistake" and "To Err is Human," essays spawned undoubtedly by what Thomas encountered in Montaigne and described in the essay devoted to this author as the writer's ability to be "fascinated by his own inconstancy" (Medusa 123).

Thomas begins his second collection with a recognition of this universal preoccupation by admitting, "We've never been so self-conscious about ourselves as we seem to be these days," and later devotes an entire essay to the topic of "The Selves." He characterizes Montaigne as someone who unapologetically indulges the self in that he "simply turns his mind loose and writes whatever he feels like writing," a mandate that Thomas has obviously granted himself as well ("Why Montaigne is Not a Bore" 121). Even when Thomas admits something as simple as "I digress," as he does in "A

Brief Historical Note on Medical Economics," and which in practise he does often throughout his essays, he demonstrates his confraternity with Montaigne. Digression is an impulse that both authors indulge frequently, elevating it to an art form. And with both authors one greets the signposts announcing detours with anticipation rather than forbearance.

Some of Thomas's essays actually extend discussions begun by Montaigne, and many of the observations Thomas makes about Montaigne are quickly recognized by the reader as being equally appropriate for Thomas himself. One of the places where a joint concern is most evident is in "On Natural Death" where Thomas quotes extensively from Montaigne's account of an experience with near death. Both writers reach the same conclusions: nature not only equips us for living but for dying as well. Thomas, in his essay on Montaigne, notes the writer's fascination with not only the self but the natural world, including bees, elephants, "magpies, jackals, foxes, songbirds, horses, dogs, oxen, turtles, fish, lions, whatnot." Thomas characterizes Montaigne as "an honest and candid man," and describes an afternoon spent with him as "the greatest fun." "Montaigne," he tells us, "makes friends in the first few pages of the book, and he becomes the best and closest of all your friends as the essays move along." "He likes himself," Thomas says, "but is never swept off his feet

after the fashion of bores." Furthermore, "He is fond of his mind, and affectionately entertained by everything in his head" (Medusa 121-22). And finally, he concludes, an encounter with the essayist leaves us with the "encouragement [of having seen] what a piece of work is, after all, an ordinary man!" To this, Thomas adds, "You cannot help but hope" (124).

Though Montaigne would certainly rank as featured guest in Thomas's work, readers encounter references to additional writers and evidence of other influences as well. Thomas's essay "The Deacon's Masterpiece" is as much an essay on this particular poem, "The Deacon's Masterpiece, or, the Wonderful 'One-Hoss Shay,'" by Oliver Wendell Holmes, as it is a re-examination of the notion that death is the result of the entire organism being at the mercy of its weakest part. Thomas challenges the popular conception that "we need our diseases--that they are natural parts of the human condition," and in so doing reproduces the better part of fifty-five lines of the poem even though he finds it generally to be a "piece of rather dreadful nineteenth-century doggerel" (108-09). Despite its artistic limitations, Thomas still finds merit in this poem's ability to function as "high metaphor," providing both a "myth about human death" and "a myth for the modern mind" (112, 109). Even more telling than Thomas's own reading of the poem is an attitude towards literature contained in the essay.

Tucked away, almost as an aside, is the observation made in response to a series of related questions that end with "How can you finish life honourably, and die honestly, without a disease?" To this Thomas responds, "This last is a very hard question, almost too hard to face, and therefore just the sort of question you should look around for a poem to answer . . ." (108).

In comments such as these, in the incorporation of literature into his essays, in his celebration and emulation of certain writers, and in his deliberate cultivation of a literary style and use of literary conventions to deal with subjects traditionally deemed nonliterary, Thomas dismantles the myth of the two cultures and the hierarchy of knowledge. Joyce Carol Oates observes that "Dr. Thomas's underlying thesis [is] that divisions are really illusory," and she suggests that his writing "anticipates the kind of writing that will appear more and more frequently, as scientists take on the language of poetry in order to communicate human truths too mysterious for old-fashioned common sense." She celebrates The Lives of a Cell for its demonstration that "The fascination with the mysterious accounts for science as well as art," stressing that "the two are really joined, a cooperative human adventure . . ." (2-3).

Though the lengthy use to which Thomas puts Holmes is not typical of his essays, other briefer literary references can be found in Thomas's writing as well. In "On Meddling,"

for example, we encounter shades of Swift when Thomas offers what he calls "a modest enough proposal" (Medusa 92), and he similarly names his essay on averting death by weapons of mass destruction "An Earnest Proposal" (Lives 27). He mimics Gertrude Stein when he tells us, in an essay on the sense of smell, that "a rose is a rose because of geraniol" ("Vibes" Lives 38), and quotes Thomas Browne in "The Long Habit" as having observed, "'The long habit of living indisposeth us to dying'" (Lives 47). We hear echoes of Robert Frost's "Birches" when Thomas says, "Perhaps we should try to get away, for a while anyway" ("A Trip Abroad" Medusa 89). Thomas celebrates, in "The Scrambler in the Mind," "the lovely Wallace Stevens sentence . . . 'The man replied, Things as they are, are changed upon the blue guitar'" (Medusa 101). And, after admitting, "I have grown fond of semicolons in recent years," he praises T. S. Eliot for his wonderful workings with these punctuation marks in the Four Quartets ("Notes on Punctuation" Medusa 104, 106).

In using these literary references, even the briefest of them, Thomas makes several demands of his readers. He assumes firstly that his readers share with him a level of literary exposure and interest--an assumption that may require an act of fictionalization on the part of some, though we would hope not many, of Thomas's readers. Secondly, in using references to literature, in effect offering readings of other texts, Thomas asks his readers to

fictionalize themselves as readers who read as he does and who share his perspectives and interpretations. Since Thomas tends to give us these perspectives implicitly rather than explicitly, we commit yet another act of fictionalization in mentally constructing them. These fictionalizations may demand a temporary suspension of our own literary biases as well as considerable adjustments of our interpretive practices, for as real readers we have learned that it is no easier to read through another's spectacles than it is to walk in another's shoes.

Even more than in his literary borrowings, it is in matters topical and even stylistic where Thomas most clearly reveals his literary company. This has been demonstrated already with regards to Montaigne, but there is another essayist where some mutual influencing is certainly evident. While I will grant that by beholding we run the risk of seeing more of the same, and that our perceptions are coloured by whatever else we have been viewing--and I have been reading a rather goodly amount of this other writer of late--still, I find the similarities between Thomas's work and Annie Dillard's quite remarkable. I was delighted to learn that apparently this is a link other readers have made as well. In a recent article in Yale Review where she humorously catalogues gifts received from her readers, Dillard tells us, "A doctor of religion on the West Coast, who lives on his ketch, sent me my third copy of Lives of a

Cell." And before concluding that "Nothing surprises me," she mentions in parentheses that "Lewis Thomas told me that whenever he opened a package that year, he was likely to find yet another copy of my book" (621).

Both Thomas and Dillard pay homage to Julian of Norwich. Dillard mentions her a number of times in several of her works, and Thomas includes what is probably her most famous quotation in a medical school commencement address which he gave: "'But all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well'" ("The Youngest and Brightest Thing Around" Lives 14). He notes another point of contact with her as well when he recalls listening to "a physicist [in] his introduction to a hard-science review of contemporary cosmological physics" appeal to the fourteenth-century anchorite. Thomas not only makes reference to that speech but chooses to end his essay, "On Various Words," with that quotation (Lives 132).[5]

Though the two writers, Dillard and Thomas, differ radically in some respects in their world view, parting

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[5] The passage, as Thomas presents it, is as follows: "He showed me a little thing, the quantity of an hazelnut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: it is all that is made."

company when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality (Dillard is an avowed Christian and makes no attempt to keep God out of her texts, whereas Thomas chooses not to speak in terms of God or creationism nor to concern himself in writing with such matters), a number of their concerns remain strikingly similar. Both evoke and celebrate a sense of wonder repeatedly in their writing. Thomas confesses to a state of being "permanently startled" in "The MBL" in which he describes a place that seems no less wondrous to him than does Dillard's Tinker Creek to her (Lives 58). One is reminded of Dillard's characteristic exuberance as well when Thomas says, in speaking about each human's beginnings in "On Embryology," that "People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell" (Medusa 130). It is worth noting too that this advice occurs in the Medusa essay that Stephen Jay Gould identifies as "the shortest and most beautiful of his [Thomas's] musings." He even suggests that readers should "Make a wall poster of it and paste it somewhere conspicuous" (33).

Another similarity to Dillard is found in "Ponds" where Thomas recounts the strange appearance of goldfish in a construction site pool. In describing the squeamish reactions of seemingly impervious New Yorkers, he reaches Dillard's conclusion that "things out of place are ill"

(Pilgrim 52). It is in his description of the wonders encountered at the "The Tucson Zoo," however, that Thomas sounds most like Dillard. Her readers will recall her account of entering the mind of the weasel in Teaching a Stone to Talk and, in Pilgrim, her various experiences of stalking muskrats, as well as her episode of experiencing the present with the puppy recounted in the chapter, "The Present." In Medusa Thomas describes something very similar that occurred to him while pausing on a glass-walled path cut between two artificial ponds:

> I was transfixed. As I now recall it, there was only one sensation in my head: pure elation mixed with amazement at such perfection. Swept off my feet, I floated from one side to the other, swiveling my brain, staring astounded at the beavers, then at the otters. I could hear shouts across my corpus callosum, from one hemisphere to the other. I remember thinking, with what was left in charge of my consciousness, that I wanted no part of the science of beavers and otters; I wanted never to know how they performed their marvels; I wished for no news about the physiology of their breathing, the coordination of their muscles, their vision, their endocrine systems, their digestive tracts. I hoped never to have to think of them as collections of cells.

> All I asked for was the full hairy complexity, then in front of my eyes, of whole, intact beavers and otters in motion.
>
> It lasted, I regret to say, for only a few minutes, and then I was back. . . . (6-7)

While Dillard's work carries the cover promotion proclaiming it to be "a mystical excursion into the natural world," Updike detects in Thomas much of the same. He hears in Thomas a voice "awed yet optimistic," proclaiming "the mystic's urge toward total unity." He further claims that Thomas's "doctrine of universal symbiosis soars with an evangelical exaltation, and it is interesting that even his careful prose lapses into the grammar of teleology" (83-85).

Thomas's careful prose also lapses, at times, into poetry, an observation that few reviewers fail to make. Spencer Klaw reminds us that "Thomas's essays were classified by his publishers as biology/philosophy," but he suggests that "given the nature of his literary gifts, they might as well, or better, have been classified as poetry" (98). Paul Gray's similar observations border on rhapsody:

> a Thomas essay blooms organically in much the same manner as a romantic ode or sonnet. A receptive mind encounters something in nature; the object out there is gradually drawn into the thinking subject; reflection occurs, hypotheses are put forward and tested, a pulse of excitement becomes

> audible; suddenly, everything coalesces, time stands still for a moment, an image is born out of matter and spirit. If Wordsworth had gone to medical school, he might have produced something very like the essays of Lewis Thomas. (78)

A New Yorker review of Medusa praises the "sheer elegance and poetry of its language, as well as its shrewd, optimistic, and gentle perceptions of the human situation," while conceding that these are "not what one expected to find in a scientific text, and especially a text that made no compromises about the level of science being presented" (145-46). Klaw, in commenting on the poetic in Thomas, suggests that the final passages of Lives elicit "wonder and delight," a reaction I must admit I too experienced long before encountering Klaw's prompting (98). I was so struck with the poetic in Thomas's summation in the last essay, that I gave in to the impulse to play with the paragraph on the page as poetry. While I remain generally sceptical of the merits of Found Poetry and, depending on the day, am prepared to relegate it to the category of the literarily useless, harmless, or gimmicky, I must admit that these lines accommodate poetic form surprisingly well. They also confirm for me White's observation, "No poet I have read has revealed so much of the language of biology and the biology of language, and why it is so necessary always to see one in terms of the other" (36):

The World's Biggest Membrane

It breathes for us,
and it does another thing for our pleasure.
Each day,
millions of meteorites fall against the outer
limits of the membrane and are burned to nothing
by the friction. Without this shelter,
our surface would long since have become
the pounded powder of the moon.
Even though our receptors
are not sensitive enough to hear it
there is comfort in knowing that
the sound is there
overhead
like the random noise
of rain on the roof at night.

I will grant that "thing" and "receptors" might ring a little tinny. Were I to receive them in this package in a creative writing class, I would likely suggest some revision. But in the margin next to "the pounded powder of the moon" and "the random noise / of rain on the roof at night," the writer would surely find two hand-scripted and heart-felt thank-yous.

I have demonstrated some of the ways in which Thomas transforms information into literature. These include his generous but controlled use of metaphor; his refusal to

cloak himself as faceless, impersonal recorder; and his discussion, inclusion and emulation of recognizable literary talents. His construction of audience remains to be addressed. Paul Gray reports that Thomas's initial invitation to become a regular columnist for The New England Journal of Medicine came about quite literally as a result of meddling by a member of Thomas's audience. The setting was a symposium at Upjohn's Brook Lodge in Michigan where Thomas, as one of the speakers, presented a talk on inflammation. Apparently, someone in the audience passed on a copy of Thomas's speech to the journal's editor. This resulted in an invitation for Thomas to become a regular columnist and the rest, as they say, is publishing history.

Thomas, we can assume, found himself having to give little consideration of his initial audience, the readers of The New England Journal of Medicine, for in writing for them he was in that enviable position of actually being able to compose for that familiar but fictional audience that the novice writer is most often encouraged to envision--someone very much like himself. Thomas read that journal, as did his friends and colleagues. He had written for it previously. And it seems likely that early in his writing for the column in "Medical Intelligence," other audiences were anticipated if not actually foreseen, for the first and each subsequent essay appeared with the same footnoted information instructing readers where to direct their

reprint requests. In retrospect, it is hard not to imagine Dr. Thomas and his editors realizing that they were on to something, though the magnitude of reprinting and translations--for Lives that would eventually mean eleven additional languages, according to Klaw--certainly must have surprised everyone involved.

The first essay, "The Lives of a Cell," appeared in the May 13, 1971 issue of the journal, with the bound collection of essays appearing under that title three years later. The essays, for the most part, are reprinted as they first appeared and are arranged in the order of their publication, with only very minor changes having been made. Reprinting of the essays on language which use foreign words and include discussions of words as words reveals standardization of some conventions such as capitalization and the use of italics. Each reprinted essay contains a brief bibliography too, but the numbering linking each item to a particular portion of the text as practised in the first publication is dropped in the second. Such changes are minor, merely stylistic and typographical housekeeping. What is considerably more noteworthy are the changes that are not made: the text appears fundamentally unaltered whereas the actual audience alters radically. A set of essays is presented initially to a particular, exclusive, professional group, readers of The New England Journal of Medicine, and then is rebound and offered to the general

public whose interest and training in science and matters medical could not be more varied.

It is hardly surprising to learn that early readers such as Klaw found Lives "not altogether easy reading," noting that "Thomas had not felt it necessary to define for his readers such terms as mycetotcyte or prokaryotic or to explain how mitochondria convert food into usable energy" (98). White also addresses the problem of terminology in Thomas:

> Go ahead, Thomas seems to be saying between the lines, look up every other word if you need to, cussing under your breath all the while; once you have learned what mitochondria are and can understand the difference between prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells, you will be all the wiser for it. (34)

Gray insists that "Thomas made few concessions to the ignorance of laymen," adding that "He certainly did not obfuscate, but gave complex matters the taxonomic precision they required" (72). Indeed, on first reading, Thomas does seem to take a great deal for granted on the part of his readers, either in his estimation of their scientific literacy or in their willingness to submit themselves to crash courses in Science Word Power Made Easy. His terminology continues to present a problem for me, a reader whose formal training in science ended with high school

chemistry, physics, and biology, and was augmented only marginally by a college course in nutrition, and moderately more so by the round-the-table chatter that comes from being raised in a home where everyone else chose health care careers. I find myself caught by the paradox of feeling that I basically do understand Thomas's essays, while having to admit my inability to define many of the terms he uses.

One begins to wonder when reading Thomas if some sense of understanding exists that transcends vocabulary. Indeed, such has been demonstrated in nonsense sentences. We only need to consider Lewis Carroll to recall that readers can be counted on to readily and reasonably assign meaning to words that they have never seen before so long as they are housed among the familiar. While readers may not be able to tell you precisely what a "gyre" or "slithy tove" is, they will in all likelihood be able to tell you that the first is a verb, an action, that could bear some relation to gyration; the second will be seen most often as a combination of adjective and noun with the adjective having a sense of the sneaky or secretive about it. It is as if in spite of not knowing, we can still know quite a bit, or at least convince ourselves that we do!

With regards to the challenges of language in Thomas, Updike claims, "Even the chore of having to look up 'chloroplasts' or 'genome' has the reward of letting you a little deeper in Thomas's secret" (303), but this is of

limited consolation as I face the list of problematic terms I personally compiled on a recent rereading of Thomas's collections. While I am sure that I missed some, the three-page list still looks like a crib sheet for the most nightmarish of all spelling bees. It contains an even hundred terms, some of which I know I have encountered and even learned before, such as "antigens," "lymphocytes," and "prostaglandin" but which, over the years, have slipped from my working vocabulary. And then there are those that strike pure terror such as "bdellovibrio," "blepharisma," "glomerulonephritis," "lipopolysaccharide endotoxin," "reticuleoendonthelial system," and "photodissociation," though I must admit the last has a certain literary or New Age ring to it and I can imagine some enterprising theorist or channeler putting it to publishable use. ("The natural extension of deconstruction is photodissociation" or "What happens in a trance is simply the achievement of a state of photodissociation.")

Thomas, to his credit and our relief, does help us out to a certain extent. For some of the less familiar terms he supplies partial definitions or at least indications of the general direction in which the term is pointing us. Allelochemics, he tells us, is "a very general system of chemical communication between living things of all kinds, plant and animal" ("Vibes" Medusa 41). An aplysia, you may recall, is "a sea slug that looks as though it couldn't be

good for anything" ("The MBL" Lives 60). Blepharisma--I was right in placing this in the scary camp--is a protozoan with eyelash-like ciliated membranes around its oral cavity, and a limulus is "one of the world's conservative beasts" ("Some Biomythology" Lives 125, "The MBL" Lives 60).

Thomas offers us some consolation when he admits that his mastery of such matters is constantly undergoing amendment. In "Organelles as Organisms" he says of the first term, "I was raised in the belief that these were obscure little engines inside my cells, owned and operated by me or my cellular delegates, private, submicroscopic bits of my intelligent flesh" (70). The rest of the essay, as anticipated, goes on to explain how that view has been challenged.

Thomas also includes a number of additional definitions to ease us along our reading way. Some are offered purely for fun. In Medusa these include his definition of environment, "the dense crowd of nearby people who talk to, listen to, smile or frown at, give to, withhold from, nudge, push, caress, or flail out at the individual," and his definition for etymon, noting that it "is supposed to be a pure ore of a word, crystalline, absolutely original, signifying just what it was always intended to signify" ("On Cloning a Human Being" 43, "On Etymons and Hybrids" 46). In "Autonomy" he describes the title concept this way: "To do things involving practised skills, you need to turn loose

the systems of muscles and nerves responsible for each manoeuvre, place them on their own, and stay out of it" (Lives 64).

Elsewhere, Thomas offers other more conventional definitions. And often when Thomas chooses not to specifically define a term, he places it in familiar enough territory, enabling the reader to reasonably navigate the term without fully mastering it. A fine example of this occurs in "The Hazards of Science" (to which we might be tempted to add "its vocabulary!") when Thomas says, "At one time or another, agents as hazardous as those of rabies, psittacosis, plague, and typhus have been dealt with by investigators in secure laboratories . . ." (Medusa 54). While many, myself included, would find themselves unfamiliar with the "ps"-word, it is easy to deduce from the company it keeps that it is something quite dreadful which has throughout history caused the death of many people.[6]

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[6] A combination of curiosity and conscience finally sent me to the dictionary upon recently encountering the word again, this time in William Trevor's The Old Boys (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964). There the fugitive Basil Jaraby worries that psittacosis (a virus disease of parrots and related birds, communicable to man, in whom it produces high fever and complications similar to pneumonia; also called "parrot fever") is spreading among his budgerigars.

He repeats this strategy in the same essay. "Classical mythology," he tells us, "is peopled with mixed beings--part man, part animal or plant--and most of them are associated with tragic stories. Recombinant DNA is a reminder of bad dreams" (57).

Thomas employs his celebrated skill with metaphor in helping to solve the problems of definition and explanation as well. White observes that he is able to combine this "with almost Mark-Twain-like wit and folksy informality" and in so doing achieves a "means of aiding comprehension for the non-specialist [while still remaining] uncompromisingly accurate in the handling of scientific . . . information and terminology" (34). In "On Disease," for example, he tells us, "When the purified endotoxin is injected into the blood, this becomes propaganda, information that bacteria are everywhere." He elaborates further in the same essay by explaining that "the defense mechanism becomes itself the disease and the cause of death, while the bacteria play the role of bystanders, innocent from their viewpoint" (Medusa 78).

Thomas is able to put definition to work for him in yet another way. On occasion, he uses it to interject some other agenda into the conversation. Consider, appropriately, what he accomplishes in "On Meddling." Thomas says, "We have a roster of diseases which medicine

calls 'idiopathic,' meaning that we do not know what causes them" (92). One wonders initially why the writer would bother to define a word that failed to make my list of the mysterious and which certainly would be second nature to his primary audience, physicians (Medusa 92). Perhaps it is a way of subtly reinforcing one of his favourite themes which others might find less easy to admit not to mention embrace: we know very little, folks, and we are learning that we know less and less all the time.[7] The irony of actually devising such a learned-sounding word to convey "I haven't

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[7] In "The Hazards of Science" Thomas says

> The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I feel totally confident is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature. Indeed, I regard this as the major discovery of the past hundred years of biology. It is, in its way, an illuminating piece of news. It would have amazed the brightest minds of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to be told by any of us how little we know, and how bewildering seems the way ahead. It is this sudden confrontation with the depth and scope of ignorance that represents the most significant contribution of twentieth-century science to the human intellect. We are, at last, facing up to it. (Medusa 58-59).

the foggiest" would not be lost on Thomas, and this may well explain his persistence in drawing it to our attention.

We encounter similar ideas in practice throughout many of his other essays as well. Speaking about a particular puzzle in the title essay of the second collection, he says, "I cannot get my mind to stay still and think it through" (5). In "The Long Habit" he recounts "a melancholy parable" and admits, "I am unsure of the meaning" (Lives 56). In discussing cooperative scientific endeavours in "Natural Science," he calls such activity "instinctive behavior" but adds, "I do not understand how it works" (Lives 102). It is perhaps one of Thomas's most gracious acts as writer to admit to his general reader (who is constantly being confronted by how much Thomas knows that she does not) that there is much that is mystery to him as well.

How best then to summarize Thomas's seemingly whimsical approach to terminology? We have seen that he sometimes explains an unfamiliar term in a simple and straight-forward manner, that he sometimes allows the context to provide the arena for reasonable guessing, and that he sometimes crafts striking metaphors to assist our understanding. We have yet to touch on another area of particular interest to Thomas--etymology or word origins--where explanation (and some may protest overexplanation) becomes the topic and method of the essay. This obsession of Thomas's creeps into a number of his essays ("creep," from the Old English, creopan, which

slithers about for a few centuries until it becomes the sixteenth-century precursor of "skiving off" as in "The fathers forsaking the Plough . . . began to creepe into the Toune").[8]

What has yet to be remarked upon regarding the challenges of Thomas's vocabulary, and what I suspect happens even more frequently than a combination of all the devices mentioned above, is that Thomas simply uses a term he deems appropriate and then leaves us on our own with it. I refer again to my list of one hundred mysterious terms. With only a very few does Thomas offer some help; more often he does not. I would suggest that what Thomas is doing here is fictionalizing an audience capable of making sense of the language he uses, when in actuality such language is currently quite unfamiliar to his real audience, though not inaccessible. The actual audience, in order to read the essays with any degree of facility, is correspondingly required to fictionalize themselves as understanding more than they do, as being in possession of a shared scientific vocabulary with the writer.

In "Thoughts for a Countdown," Thomas suggests that bacteria "live by collaboration, accommodation, exchange,

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[8] In "Living Language" Thomas describes the study of word origins as "a field in which the irresponsible amateur can have a continually mystifying sort of fun" (Lives 137).

and barter," and that in this regard they "should provide nice models for the study of interactions between forms of life at all levels" (Lives 7). Given that the writer and reader certainly qualify as forms of life at some level, Thomas's model may prove useful in considering the writer and his audience.[9] Thomas's readers too must proceed by "collaboration, accommodation, exchange, and barter." They must be co-labourers with the writer to an extent beyond that which traditionally has been demanded of readers of nonfictional prose. While reading Thomas is a pleasure, it is often work as well. His readers must be willing to accommodate the expectations Thomas makes of them, be willing to exchange old ideas for new, lack of knowledge for greater scientific literacy; and in so doing Thomas is

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[9] When I speak of audience now, I refer to Thomas's secondary audience, that group of people who came to his essays after they were collected and published in book form. This audience could not be expected to have the level of medical knowledge and training of his primary audience, readers of The New England Journal of Medicine. Subsequently and ironically, though, this secondary audience has become Thomas's primary audience in terms of readership. What originally was presented to the specialist has been embraced by the non-specialist, or, if you will, the specialist in something else.

willing to give them something in return, offering his readers sufficient help, incentive, entertainment, and information to keep them engaged. Readers must enter into this agreement with Thomas if his essays are to be of any more value to them than a passing fancy. They must accommodate the writer's demands that they fictionalize themselves as readers in possession of a shared vocabulary; and in the give and take, the exchange and barter that such a role requires, they may well prefigure the actual readers to come who will need to make less and less of an accommodation as writers such as Thomas continue, in Updike's words, "to trace the idea of 'living' across countless categories, along micro-and macro-scales" (303).

Gordon P. Thomas, in "Mutual Knowledge: a Theoretical Basis for Analyzing Audience," suggests some of the ways in which a writer fictionalizes an audience as he writes. He maintains that in the reading-writing situation, which is "perhaps the most complex of meaning-making activities," a writer and reader are working together with three branches of mutual knowledge (583). He first of all defines mutual knowledge as "the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that a speaker or writer and the audience <u>knowingly</u> have in common," differentiating this from "shared knowledge" which he describes as "information and beliefs that are shared but may not be believed to be shared" (582). While Gordon Thomas's labels may be initially confusing in that we do not

commonly draw the fine distinctions between "mutual" and "shared" that he asks of us, the concepts as he has defined them suggest some of the levels at which fictionalization occurs in the writing and reading processes. Gordon Thomas requires that we constantly remind ourselves that "mutual" to him describes a degree of intimacy that "shared" does not, that in his scheme one can share something quite apart from awareness of the fact that it is shared, and apart from any concern for the co-sharers who may well be strangers. Such sharing presumably could involve anything from a case of this year's strain of influenza, to front row tickets for seats at a Paul Simon concert, to a penchant for Haagan Dazs ice cream.

Gordon Thomas differentiates between three kinds of mutual knowledge, that knowledge that we knowingly have in common: knowledge of conventions, knowledge of language, and world knowledge. It is this last category of world knowledge that concerns him the most in his article, for in the composition of nonfictional prose this is the area that he feels requires the most consideration. Gordon Thomas describes some of the collaboration that takes place between writer and reader in this regard:

> Before a writer even produces one word, her audience already knows a good deal about what she <u>might</u> say. She uses her knowledge of what she believes the audience knows in order to say

> something "new." The most obvious way she manages this is to refer to concepts or places in a way that indicates she is expecting the audience to know more about this subject than she is explicitly saying. In other words, a skilled writer will have a fairly accurate idea of what she can expect her audience to know about the world--facts, common opinions, and so forth. Included in this "World Knowledge" is a good understanding of what her audience already knows and believes about the world. A skilled writer will have as her primary task the goal of getting her audience to believe or feel closer to the way the writer does about a certain aspect of the world; the traditional expression of this feeling or belief is the familiar "thesis statement," but we also know that in much writing such a feeling is often implicit. (587)

Lewis Thomas takes this process a step further. The fiction he creates for his audience extends beyond their world knowledge--that body of facts and viewpoints--and encompasses their knowledge of language. The reader must read <u>as if</u> the language Thomas is using is mutual language. We might even take this so far as to suggest that in so doing Thomas is challenging the conventions of reading and writing nonfiction by challenging his readers in each of

Gordon Thomas's three levels of mutual knowledge.

In creating the necessary fictions that allow us to read The Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail as if we know more than we actually do, we are not collectively committing intellectual fraud. We are rather acknowledging that achieving mutual conventions, language, and knowledge in a reading-writing transaction is a much more cooperative and imaginative enterprise than we may have realized previously. We are also acknowledging that those branches of knowledge overlap and that each is capable, under the control of the skillful writer and attentive reader, of affording some necessary compensation. This allows the reader to navigate the gaps defined by the writer and reader's differing levels of knowledge.

This is where the "exchange and barter" enters the equation. Lewis Thomas gives us definitions, metaphors, explanations, and models in exchange for a certain leap of faith that we as readers are required to make. For the present we are required to accept that what may not be clear to us is indeed so, and as such is accessible to us with some effort. As readers of fiction we are accustomed to making these leaps of faith, these willing suspensions of disbelief, these entrances into the narrative world, these acts of fictionalization. As readers of nonfiction, however, we have not been as keen in recognizing that many of these same demands are being placed upon us. While it

may seem that the leap Lewis Thomas is asking us to make is particularly large and potentially risky, we have to admit that such a request is coming from a writer and scientist who meets us more than half way. And in so doing he is not standing on the other side calling for us to come over. Rather, the call he issues repeatedly to us throughout his essays includes the reminder that we are already on the same side.

Chapter V

"Obsessed with Possibilities": Tossing and Turning with Lewis Thomas in Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony

In the preceding chapters I have traced the development of critical reception of the modern essay as a distinctive genre beginning with George Lukács and Virginia Woolf's commentary published in the early decades of this century. I have shown that while the essay has probably been the most neglected genre in literary studies despite its presence for several centuries in English letters, currently efforts are under way to reclaim and reexamine it. By way of joining these efforts, I have proposed that one of the modern essay's distinguishing features is its adaptability seen in part in that it can both be literature and be about literature; it can also accommodate many of the characteristics of other literary genres without sacrificing its distinct status. The essay can be poetic, didactic, lyrical, or argumentative. It can be humorous or meditative, conversational or introspective. It can progress logically in defence of a proposition. It can champion a cause. Or, as several of the essays to be discussed in this chapter have demonstrated, it can simply provide a framework for assorted observations and associations that resist reduction to a single thesis.

In focusing on the collected essays of two contemporary American essayists, Annie Dillard and Lewis Thomas, I have further demonstrated the diversity of this form and have suggested that the essay demands a unique cooperation between reader and writer in order to be realized. In seeking to explain this relationship, I have taken Walter Ong's assertion that the writer's audience is always a fiction and have been the first to apply it, so far as I have been able to determine, to literary nonfiction.

In focusing on the relationship established in the essay between writer and reader, I have found that in identifying the role required of her, the reader of the essay must often first identify the role the writer has adopted. And as would be expected, the possible and subsequently identifiable relationships between reader and writer are numerous. Sometimes the reader is asked to cast herself as an intimate of the writer, and other times as a subordinate. Sometimes the writer so positions himself and the reader in relationship to what is being observed that the two become co-viewers. Sometimes, upon recognizing and admitting his own limitations of understanding and expression, the writer solicits help or merely indulgence from the reader. In such cases he may offer the reader several possible readings, seek deferral, or admit defeat. Sometimes the reader is required to fictionalize a level of mutual knowledge and understanding existing between herself

and the writer, while at other times the reader is required to feign ignorance in order to assume the role of one receiving instruction. Sometimes the reader is required to follow the writer through the circuitry of logical connections in pursuit of understanding, and at other times surrender to a far different pattern is required.

In a recent article called "Rediscovering The Essay," W. Ross Winterowd examines single essays from three prominent essayists--Joan Didion, Lewis Thomas, and Loren Eiseley--and demonstrates an instance requiring this latter approach. In so doing he calls to our attention the pitfalls and limitations of viewing the essay exclusively as a short, diagramable piece of prose existing primarily to make a point, a practice which Winterowd claims "demeans the experience that the essay provides--as a colleague of mine once said, you sell your soul for a pot of message" (150-51). In examining these three essays Winterowd demonstrates how at least one type of essay, which he calls the prose lyric, "breaks out of the syllogistic, linear Western form and, in so doing, frees itself of the strictures of discursiveness" (147).

The Thomas essay which Winterowd discusses in this context is the title essay of Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. This essay appears last in the collection that bears its name, unlike the title essays which appear first in the medical doctor's previous

two essay collections, The Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail. But more than the positioning of "Late Night Thoughts" is unusual. What is most striking about this essay, according to Winterowd, is that "the 'real' message is that the real 'message' is unsayable, even unthinkable--beyond comprehension and, hence, beyond expression" (151). Winterowd points out that in both the essays by Didion and Thomas, "neither . . . advances an argument . . . nor is either informative in the sense of reducing the reader's uncertainty about the topic or of supplying fresh data; nonetheless, both are, in my opinion at least, particularly satisfying and convincing" (152). Winterowd praises these essays which "follow leads other than the logical," claiming that they move forward by what he calls "anecdotal progression." He further uses his analysis of these essays to support his assertion that too often writing teachers unnecessarily limit their students both in their "range of discourse" and in "their capacity for thought and expression" (155-56). Students, he argues, should be freer to pursue their thoughts in writing; they should be allowed to arrive at places other than predetermined conclusions. Furthermore, he maintains, they should be as free in their writing to be tentative, exploratory, and inconclusive as are the published essayists who embrace and practise those freedoms.

It is an interesting and, to many, a radical proposition, challenging generations of composition practices. It should come as no surprise to the reader of Thomas that Winterowd would find in the doctor a companion in challenging conventions. This is something that Thomas appears to do almost by habit. In his earlier collections he gives advice on "How to Fix the Premedical Curriculum," as well as on how to transform "The Health-Care System." He offers nurses the moon in an essay devoted to them and, in "On Embryology," a sky-writing show to anyone who can explain to him the switching mechanisms in an embryo's cells. In Late Night Thoughts his challenges include, among other things, the creation of his own list of the "Seven Wonders" of the World, and his suggestion in "The Lie Detector" that a lie's damage may extend to the physiological.

Thomas can be seen in many of his essays, and most particularly in this latest collection, to challenge not only commonplace ideas but commonplace forms as well. His is not a blanket rejection or rewriting of what has come before, however. While several of Thomas's essays in this latest collection do indeed move in mysterious ways, a number of them still adhere to more predictable patterns. It is to Thomas's credit that he is able to manipulate different modes of essayistic discourse so convincingly; and it should not be surprising, therefore, to suggest that

those essays which unfold with anecdotal progression make different demands on the reader than those which rely on more familiar patterns. Even the essays that rely on the more familiar patterns still offer their own amount of upheaval. Thomas possesses and repeatedly demonstrates the uncanny ability of being able to take the reader by a seemingly familiar route to new territory.

In the essay "Humanities and Science," Thomas makes the claim, "I prefer to turn things around in order to make precisely the opposite case" (150). He is responding here to the image of the self-satisfied researcher whose new information fits ever so neatly like a row of blocks added to yesterday's solidly laid foundation. This is not how progress in science, or anywhere else for that matter, normally occurs, Thomas maintains. Instead of predictably adding by today's efforts to yesterday's sureties, what we are more likely to stumble upon is the realization that we know less, much less, than we thought we did. What we learn today may at times confirm what we learned yesterday, but more likely, Thomas suggests, the new will topple the old. Such an acknowledgement leads quite naturally to a return to a familiar theme of Thomas's, the celebration of ignorance, error, and ambiguity.

His admission, "I prefer to turn things around in order to make precisely the opposite case," applies to much more than the approach taken in the particular essay in which the

statement is made. It can be taken as Thomas's intellectual and artistic credo, as a statement of methodology and formal intent, for many of his essays which contain considerable evidence of both dismantling and reassembling. It is a pattern that predates the conventions of Western discourse but certainly contributes to its shaping. This was first pointed out to me by one of my professors, Dr. Chris Bullock, who, almost in passing in a seminar one day, referred to this rhetorical pattern that we were frequently encountering in our analysis of various prose examples including our own writing, as "the old 'ye-have-heard-men-say-unto-you . . . but-I-say-unto-you' pattern." The reference, of course, is to the gospel writers' accounts of similar phraseology in Christ's discourse.

One could speculate with interesting results, I am sure, as to the level of authority consciously or unconsciously being invoked by the writer who similarly shapes his discourse today. Part of what sets Thomas's use of this pattern apart, nonetheless, is the deliberate undermining of his own authority which is often found in the very essays that first set up the old view and then offer his new and often radical departure. T. Patrick Hill, in his review of <u>The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine-Watcher</u>, praises Thomas for his "well-tempered skepticism" and his "refusal to take himself too seriously," qualities much in evidence throughout his other collections as well.

One of the essays which demonstrates a number of these claims about Thomas's prose is "The Attic of the Brain." The essay begins with an autobiographical reference to the home of the author's parents which contained an attic, a room which Thomas recalls was "the darkest and strangest part of the building . . . filled with unidentifiable articles too important to be thrown out with the trash but no longer suitable to have at hand." He aptly labels this "mysterious space" as "the memory of the place," existing "safely and comfortably . . . in the tissues of the house" (138).

The pattern of one way versus the other way, or then versus now, becomes evident as early as the second paragraph which Thomas begins with the words, "These days . . . ." He points out that "the deep closets in which we used to pile things up for temporary forgetting are rarely designed into new homes" and observes that "Everything now is out in the open, openly acknowledged and displayed" until it is deemed no longer useful and is discarded.

Thomas describes our behaviour of late with regards to memory and the subconscious in terms of the attic metaphor which he so elaborately draws. Now, he maintains, we find "the trapdoor always open and stepladder in place [and] we are always in and out of it, flashing lights around, naming everything unmystified." This, Thomas decides, has not been to our advantage and he offers another of his by now

familiar "earnest proposal[s]." "Bring back the old attic," he suggests (140). It obviously is there for a purpose, he maintains, serving a useful biological function. The species needs to stash away, to forget, and from time to time to make inexplicable retrievals. Too much housekeeping, too much open access leads to what Thomas labels "one of the great errors of our time [which is] to think that by thinking about thinking, and then talking about it, we could possibly straighten out and tidy up our minds." We are in need of some re-minding here, Thomas seems to suggest:

> The human mind is not meant to be governed, certainly not by any book of rules yet written; it is supposed to run itself, and we are obliged to follow it along, trying to keep up with it as best we can. It is all very well to be aware of your awareness, even proud of it, but never try to operate it. You are not up to the job. (141)

Thomas's arguing for a new way in this essay actually amounts to arguing for a return to the old way, albeit for a new set of reasons. And in putting forward this particular argument in a lighthearted and entertaining way, aware as he most surely is of the limitations of any argument that proceeds largely by analogy, Thomas refuses to take himself too seriously. In one stroke he admits his own limitations while demonstrating that he is practising his own advice

when he says in the essay's final paragraph, "I have tried to think of a name for the new professional activity, but each time I think of a good one I forget it before I can get it written down." He has some fun too at the expense of those whose livelihood he is challenging when, in pondering a name for the approach he is advocating, he ends with the suggestion and admission, "Psychorepression is the only one I've hung on to, but I can't guess at the fee schedule."

As is often the case, Thomas turns his argument in "The Attic of the Brain" into an exploration of humankind's limited knowledge. One of the main reasons for returning to the old practices with regard to the human mind, Thomas asserts, is that we simply do not know enough to meddle. Speaking of the unconscious mind, Thomas says, "I would no more think of meddling with it than trying to exorcise my liver, an equally mysterious apparatus." He continues with this caution: "Until we know a lot more, it would be wise, as we have learned from other fields in medicine, to let them be, above all not to interfere" (142).

We find another example of turned-around thinking earlier in the collection in "The Artificial Heart," an essay which also makes the issue of lack of knowledge central in its brief three-and-a-half pages. Thomas begins this essay with a link to an earlier piece in which he recounts his personal reception of a pacemaker, "an item of engineering that ranks as genuine high technology." Shortly

after this surgery he learned of the development of the artificial heart which he was forced to view as "far outclassing anything like my miniature metronome" (64). In this essay the revisioning that takes place is initially the writer's, but he ends with the assertion and invitation, "We should be thinking more about this . . ." (67). First of all, he says, I thought my pacemaker was a marvel. Then a larger marvel appeared which forced me to view my own mini-marvel with a little less wonder. The thinking does not end there, however, and Thomas moves from the wonder and euphoria of the potential life-saving value of the larger creation to the stark realization of its basic inaffordability on a grand scale. Thomas urges that we use this invention and the state of affairs it brings to light to secure more funding for basic scientific research. This in turn will enable us eventually to get to the roots of the situation that the new technology, which Thomas calls "halfway technology," in all its splendour, does not solve (66). Thomas anticipates the day when the artificial heart will be viewed as "an interesting kind of antique, similar in its historical significance to the artificial lung and the other motor-driven prosthetic devices" that the Salk vaccine, the result of basic biological research, rendered obsolete (67).

"The Artificial Heart" contains none of the levity of "The Attic of the Brain." It is Thomas at his most

persistent. And yet his conviction is kept from sliding into dogmatism by his willingness to admit that what he once held as "unqualified" is now regarded with some degree of reserve, that what once appeared to be unquestionably a "triumph" now must be viewed more guardedly (64). These matters, Thomas is quick to admit, require "the second thought, and third and fourth thoughts" (65). Such candid admissions of his own revising leave his reader all the more predisposed to attempt the requisite thinking that Thomas requests.

They suggest too the role in which Thomas is asking the reader to cast herself most frequently in these essays. Regardless of whatever progress the reader may have made personally in thinking through the issues that Thomas raises, thinking that may have taken place well before her actual encounters with the issues as they are packaged and presented by Thomas, here she is asked to fictionalize herself as a member of a group content to view things the way Thomas initially sets them out, a view that he labels often by implication as traditional or historical. The next stage involves fictionalizing herself as sufficiently disinterested and open-minded to be willing to review the situation, not just from a slightly different angle but often from the opposite perspective. Here the reader is asked to construct herself as stepping away from the group, or more specifically the shared intellectual or ideological

space occupied by the group as it has been circumscribed by Thomas, to a space, a much smaller and more intimate and ultimately more friendly space, created by and occupied by Thomas. In order for the reading transaction to be realized, the reader must be willing to fictionalize this jersey swapping. There is an element of seduction in the process too. Thomas woos his reader with pretty phrases, humour, and the promise of intelligent company. He adds urgency to his propositions by articulating them often in terms of survival, not only of the individual--a role with which the reader can readily identify--but of the species and even of the planet.

Having been walked through the process imaginatively by Thomas, the reader then has the freedom, if she chooses, to approach the issues from beyond the context of this reading alone and to take a more self-determined stance, to consider if she so chooses Thomas's silences as well, to discover those viable parts of the arguments on both sides not included in the few pages Thomas devotes to any one piece. The reader may choose to grapple with the issues beyond the bounds dictated by Thomas's authorship, in which case much more than this initial reading enters into the process, or the reader may simply move to the next essay and participate in the necessary fiction that it requires.

"On the Need for Asylums" is another of Thomas's essays which follows the pattern of calling for an about face, or,

more accurately in this instance, a repeat about face. Thomas argues here that an overestimation of the sufficiency of psychopharmacology and the resulting exodus from the state-run asylums has resulted in a "'breakthrough'" turning into a "breakout," leading ultimately to what might best be described as a breakdown (98). Thomas explains how psychiatric patients in conditions somewhat improved, but in no sense of the word cured, have too often been released from an institution onto the streets with inadequate mechanisms in place to care for them in times of relapse or crisis. Thomas's argument on one level is simple: until we can think of a better way to do things, bring back the old system. Do not be afraid of tampering with the old system, he argues. It has ample room for improvement, but a system has got to be preferable in such instances, Thomas maintains, to the absence of system.

Thomas begins his essay with a catalogue of the laudable achievements which justify consideration as "'medical miracle[s].'" He immediately follows this with a caution against confusing what he calls "halfway technologies" with cure, again returning to his assertion that we still know very little and need to balance our decisions on what is known against our realizations that much remains unknown (96). Thomas cautions against proclaiming a piece of the puzzle the whole picture, a warning that many fields may do well to heed.

The essay "Clever Animals" demonstrates again how often earlier hypotheses have been shown to be in need of revision, and how even then in the process new mysteries are likely to make themselves unknown. This essay, while underscoring the need to remain open to revision and to regular demonstrations and subsequent admissions of our own limited knowledge, unfolds largely by way of the "anecdotal progression" that Winterowd identifies. The essay consists of five experiments or observations which in the retelling become vignettes: (1) the "Clever Hans Error" in which a horse initially thought to be capable of mathematics is eventually shown instead to be acutely sensitive to human response; (2) a series of studies on cat behaviour which at first identifies their invention of rituals in completing a simple, reward-producing task but which reinterpreted is seen as audience-induced behaviour--the cats, in short, were showing off; (3) the experience of scientists studying the boundaries of ant colonies only, to their painful discovery, to be declared the enemy by both sides; (4-5) and two bee stories involving the bee's apparent ability to predict the movement of those watching them, and the account of a particular species of Brazilian bee that through addiction or altruism (or something else) strips buildings of DDT. Thomas ranks these stories according to the relative closure accorded each mystery. The "Clever Hans Error" is no longer puzzling and is therefore recounted first. The ants and

bees, however, invite further speculation and investigation and are discussed later. These last two accounts demonstrate, as Thomas concludes his essay, that "Nothing about bees, or other animals, seems beyond imagining."

This essay, as do a number of the others in this collection, prefigures the final, haunting essay with which Thomas ends his collection. That "Nothing . . . seems beyond imagining" is taken up again and ultimately challenged in "Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony." We are prepared for the title itself by a number of similar time-linked references in earlier essays. In "On Matters of Doubt," for example, Thomas says, "I do admit to worrying, late at night, about that matter of time . . ." (159). He pictures the practitioner in the essay "Alchemy" as "a serious professional" who must put in "long periods of apprenticeship and a great deal of late-night study" (30). In his autobiographical reflections he recalls that much of the real learning in medical school took place informally, off the wards and came "from each other in late-night discussion" (The Youngest Science 29). In this same work he makes reference to "the image taped in my temporal lobe ready for replaying so many late nights" of Crazy Willy driving the town garbage wagon (2). He also recalls his own physician father who "must have been called out for patients who were dying or dead a great many of his late nights" (10). Taken together there is the sense of the urgent,

unusual, informing, and potentially tragic in these references, all of which are traceable in the fabric of the final essay.

"Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony" is not Thomas's only essay that attempts to deal with final matters. "Basic Science and the Pentagon," "Science and 'Science,'" "Altruism," "On Medicine and the Bomb," and the collection's first essay, "The Unforgettable Fire," also attempt to speak about the unspeakable. In "The Unforgettable Fire" Thomas touches on the inability of human thought and language to deal with what cannot be ignored. He imagines in the context of thermonuclear warfare those aboard submarines "roaming far at sea" who would find themselves "out of touch with the rest of the world, forced to read the meaning of silence" (8). "'Damage,'" he tells us, "is not the real term [for what may happen]; the language has no word for it" (6).

Thomas's grappling with matters approaching the borders of time extends backwards as well. In "The Corner of the Eye" he calls the "Big Bang" a misnomer, suggesting instead that whatever marked our beginnings "was something else, occurring in the most absolute silence we can imagine. It was," he suggests "the Great Light" (15). Similarly, in "Making Science Work," Thomas refers to "radioastronomical instruments for listening to the leftover sounds of the creation of the universe," noting that "the astronomers are

dumbstruck, they can hardly hear themselves think" (23).

In grappling with language, in naming, Thomas points out the increased frequency of borrowing from the discourse of what is commonly viewed as the other. He tells us, "The physicists, needing new terms for their astonishments, borrow 'quarks' from Joyce and label precisely quantitative aspects of matter almost dismissively with poetically allusive words like 'strangeness,' 'color,' and 'flavor.'" He goes so far as to predict that "soon some parts of the universe will begin to 'itch'" (158). Thomas sees this collapse of boundaries as essentially positive. He refuses to become embroiled in the "'two-cultures' controversy," arguing instead that "there is in fact a solid middle ground to stand on, a shared common earth beneath the feet of all the humanists and all the scientists, a single underlying view of the world that drives all scholars . . . ." This he identifies as "bewilderment" (156-57).

Throughout his essays Thomas draws his readers' attention to "deep mysteries, and profound paradoxes," claiming that what awaits us in the centuries ahead is "a wilderness of mystery." He believes, "There are more than seven-times-seven types of ambiguity in science, awaiting analysis," and what this century has shown us most profoundly is "the revelation of human ignorance" ("Humanities and Science" 150-51). He makes the same claim in "Making Science Work" where he notes, "The principal

discoveries in this century, taking all in all, are the glimpses of the depth of our ignorance about nature" (19).

Far from seeing this as cause for despair, Thomas tells us, "The thing to do . . . is to celebrate our ignorance" ("On Matters of Doubt" 163). In the same essay he cautions us about becoming single-minded and overzealous in our commitment to unravelling mysteries, claiming, "Most things in the world are unsettling and bewildering, and it is a mistake to try to explain them away; they are there for marvelling at and wondering at, and we should be doing more of this" (159). He decries the general lack of opportunity to do just this in formal education, particularly medical education with which he is most familiar. He recalls with fondness how as a young member of a medical class himself "it gradually dawned on us that we didn't know much that was really useful . . . that medicine, for all its façade as a learned profession, was in real life a profoundly ignorant occupation" (The Youngest Science 29).

In this same book, which functions well as a companion piece to Thomas's essay collections by providing context and in some instances the room for more extended commentary than the writer allows himself in his shorter essays, Thomas returns to another of his most familiar reversals, the elevation of error and ambiguity:

> In real life, research is dependent on the human capacity for making predictions that are

> wrong, and on the even more human gift for bouncing back to try again. This is the way the work goes. The predictions, especially the really important ones that turn out, from time to time, to be correct are pure guesses. Error is the mode.
>
> We all know this in our bones, whether engaged in science or in the ordinary business of life. More often than not, our firmest predictions are chancy, based on what we imagine to be probability rather than certainty, and we become used to blundering very early in life. Indeed, the universal experience, mandated in the development of every young child, of stumbling, dropping things, saying the words wrong, spilling oatmeal, and sticking one's thumb in one's eye are part of the preparation for adult living. A successful child is one who has learned so thoroughly about his own fallibility that he can never forget it, all the rest of his life. (82)

One of the types of ambiguity that Thomas both celebrates and demonstrates in his writing is the ambiguity of language. In his autobiography he shows how a statement as seemingly clear as "'Here come the Catholics'" can move from the evccation of childish playground experiences to a

general rallying cry, well-ensconced within the vernacular of his family's shared discourse (115). He also demonstrates in The Youngest Science the tendency of labels to stick long after their glue of literalness has come unstuck: witness that, according to Thomas, in medical circles "it is still officially announced, each year, that the 'Atlantic City meetings' will be held in San Francisco, or Washington, or wherever" (127).

Though Thomas characteristically labours to achieve clarity in his prose, a throwback perhaps to his days of writing "scientific papers, around two hundred of them, composed in the relentlessly flat style required for absolute unambiguity in every word," a style which he decides is "hideous language as I read it today," there are times when he deliberately courts ambiguity and leaves his readers with several possible readings instead of one clear one (The Youngest Science 242). He demonstrates the power an audience possesses over decoding a message, even when that message extends to a mass audience rather than to a single reader. He shows too how time invariably alters readings. Both of these can be seen in his conclusion to "The Unforgettable Fire" where he draws our attention to a cenotaph in Hiroshima which bears the words, "REST IN PEACE, FOR THE MISTAKE WILL NOT BE REPEATED." He has come to realize, he tells us, "The inscription has a life of its own. Intended first as a local prayer and promise, it has

already changed its meaning into a warning, and is now turning into a threat" (11).

The closing of another essay, "The Lie Detector," also leaves itself open to several readings. This is the essay in which Thomas suggests that lying may actually damage the responsible organism and that we may well be genetically programmed for truth. He ends this essay with the following: "I don't want to go over this again. I didn't write any of the above." Clearly the last sentence is a lie, though the penultimate may well be penned in earnest; Thomas did write these sentences and those preceding them. We know this and he knows we know this. The "lie" then is effectively nullified, cancelled because conventions dictate that we take the evidence of this printed page, part of the larger bound body bearing Thomas's signature, over and above the claims of one suspect sentence. On one level Thomas may just be having us on, refusing once again to take himself too seriously, and suggesting that in this instance the audience may do well to do likewise. Or we may decide to read the ending of his piece as a disclaimer. We may conclude that the writer wishes to declare this a failed exercise, demonstrating rather than the validity of his initial proposition that "My own mind, fallible, error-prone, forgetful, unpredictable, and ungovernable, is way over my head" (The Youngest Science 90). Perhaps Thomas is conceding what one of his reviewers, Robert P. McIntosh, has

suggested: "There is no guarantee that excellent exposition necessarily leads to correct positions." Or perhaps he is demonstrating that his writing is at times, like his experimentation with the mysteries affecting the posture of rabbit ears, a query pursued simply "because it was amusing" (The Youngest Science 158).

The amusing is a powerful motivator for Thomas and subsequently for his readers. Even though this last collection of essays is generally viewed as being more somber, less optimistic than his previous ones, Thomas still demonstrates his penchant for identifying and enjoying the comic. Paul Stuewe remarks that this collection in general possesses "a much less cheery tone" and R.Z. Sheppard labels it as "low-key lyricism" (33, 96). Still, as Margery C. Coombs points out, Thomas brings to bear the "occasional whimsy to his varied topics." In "Seven Wonders," for example, Thomas finds that in response to an invitation to participate in the rewriting of the list of the world's wonders, he first "had to look up the old biodegradable Wonders." He is quick to observe the irony of situation too, noting that "if the magazine could get any seven people to agree on a list of any such seven things you'd have the modern Seven Wonders right there at the dinner table" (55). Another particularly entertaining passage describes Byron the talking crow who, for a time, kept the Thomas household "constantly on the fly, answering doors and telephones,

oiling hinges, looking out the window for falling bodies, glancing into empty bathrooms for the sources of flushing" ("On Smell" 41). Thomas's clever twists of language are at times truly delightful too as when, in speaking about his pacemaker, he remarks, "I would never have thought I had it in me" ("My Magical Metronome" 47), or when he refers to computer thought as, at best, "a cousin of human thought once removed" ("Making Science Work" 22).

When all is said and done--and we are reminded at once of Thomas's assertions in this collection that all can never be said because it cannot be imagined, and all cannot be done because every new discovery brings with it a new set of questions--it is Thomas's use of language that ranks in my estimation among his highest accomplishments. While it is difficult to separate language from the arguments it is carrying, from the ideas it is propounding, from the invocations it is bearing, there remains a beauty in the arrangement and rhythms of Thomas's prose regardless of his subject. He says in "The Corner of the Eye," "The real meaning in music comes from tones only audible in the corner of the mind" (13). Somewhere in the human mind there must be a corner reserved for responding to the beauty of language as well, for as any reader of Thomas will attest, his prose finds those spots and resonates there. A reader would be hard pressed to find a Thomas essay that did not deliver somewhere a stunning parcel of words. And some of

his most striking comments in this regard are made, appropriately, when he speaks in terms of language. He does this in The Youngest Science while reflecting on "the wholesale slaughter of cells on every side" that marks the early stages of the development of each of us. He observes, "The piecing together of a fetus involved a great deal of obsessive editing" (154). And again in "My Magical Metronome," upon confronting his electrocardiogram, he sees, "The handwriting on the wall . . . . And illiterate at that" (46). I must admit that I find this last example as puzzling as I do striking. I would welcome the opportunity to ask Thomas why he opted for "illiterate" there and not "illegible."[10] I may yet gather the courage to disturb him about this by mail, though I suspect I will stand by my conviction that writers should be left to answer their own voices rather than to be disturbed by chronic reader-induced

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[10] I read with envy Douglas Vipond and Russell A. Hunt's recently published report of their conversation with writer John McPhee in which McPhee justifies to them a number of his word choices. This insight into one nonfiction writer's process is recorded in "The Strange Case of the Queen-Post Truss: John McPhee on Writing and Reading" College Composition and Communication 42.2 (May 1991): 200-10.

hiccups triggered by the familiar and surely dreaded "excuse me, but . . . ."

Thomas continues his pondering about language in Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. In "Seven Wonders" we read, "Wonder is a word to wonder about. It contains a mixture of messages . . ." (55). And in "On Speaking of Speaking" he devotes the entire essay to the development of spoken language and links language with play, crediting children with creating and passing on language to us. McIntosh, in his review of Late Night Thoughts, suggests that Thomas demonstrates a special preference for linguistics, a subject which McIntosh calls "the essence of humanism." Thomas describes himself in The Youngest Science as a medical student who early on became "obsessed with possibilities" (152). To the writer's credit and his readers' delight, this obsessive curiosity and craftsmanship extend to his encounters with language as well, and mark what I think may well be his single most important achievement. Thomas has done many things. And he has done many things well. But it seems to me that none could possibly surpass what we find at the core of each of his essays. Lewis Thomas unleashes the power of the simple declarative sentence.

Epilogue

A Note on Methodology Encompassing the Confessional

Lately my formal introduction to science in junior high school has come to mind. This is not surprising, perhaps, given that I am currently studying the essays of a self-taught biologist and an eminent physician-researcher. Recalling my formal introduction to the world of science elicits more worrisome memories than wonderful ones, however. I remember Mr. Carey's painstaking efforts to reveal to me and my classmates the wisdom of what he called "the scientific method," including such categories as aim, apparatus, method, data, and conclusions. This last section, we were instructed, was to grow out of everything that came before.

How quickly we learned otherwise. We knew what would happen if we <u>really</u> recorded what we saw. We knew what the response would be if our conclusion simply stated, "I observed that when I mixed these two chemicals they produced a nasty odour that reminded me of passing through Sudbury on my family's summer drives west to Saskatchewan; I also learned that when splashed accidentally on pantyhose this solution changes their colour from suntan to something like ripe pumpkin." We knew what minimal, red-circled number would come back from the instructor in response to such observations. And so we never made them.

We learned to see what we thought we were expected to see, to record what we thought we were expected to discover, to work from the conclusion backwards, to invent data if necessary. The guiding question became, "How is this supposed to turn out?" or "What was the right answer for this experiment last year?" This sorry, but I fear typical, introduction to laboratory experimentation produced considerable camaraderie among my classmates. It did not, to my knowledge, produce any scientists.

I can recall at the time being decidedly uncomfortable with the whole enterprise. I remember thinking that what we were doing was definitely silly and possibly wrong. I remember thinking that somehow this must violate our Busy Bee pledge from first grade which stated that we would always "do our honest part." I remember thinking that this was not teaching us anything useful and that certainly real scientists could not possibly be working this way, or if they were, the rest of us who were counting on them to cure the common cold had better stock up on Kleenex. I did not blame the teachers. I suspected they knew all about our academic survival tactics and were not particularly pleased with them either. But I remained uncomfortable knowing that somehow real learning was being undermined.

As I progressed in school I discovered that the situation in many other subject areas was not much different. Too often the quest for grades seemed to demand

divining the right answer and then working back from it. This might involve chatting with an older friend two grades ahead or surreptitiously glancing at the answer pages in a textbook's appendix. All the while, as a teacher-in-the-making, I felt convinced that too little real learning was taking place, that there certainly had to be better ways of learning.

It has been thirty years since I first entered a classroom and, in addition to my continued mental wrestling with these issues, I now find myself searching for ways to help my own students achieve a more authentic learning experience for themselves. Most recently, however, the struggle has been more personal and has taken the form of a six-year doctoral program in English, culminating in a dissertation of about 200 pages which my Department of English Graduate Guide tells me "may be sufficient to demonstrate the requisite intellectual vitality" for the degree I seek (57). At times I have looked at this undertaking as my last chance to get it right--my last chance in a formal learning situation to engage in honest inquiry as opposed to working backwards from some predetermined conclusion.

Everyone I know who has passed the PhD Way before me assures me that the process will be a struggle and that what is required, above all else, is endurance. This I accepted early on, and I began bemusedly to view the experience as a

kind of atonement. Perhaps if learning were done properly this time, I reasoned, it would make up for all those episodes of pseudo-learning. Perhaps it would teach me ways of fostering more authentic learning that I in turn could take with me into my classrooms in the future. Perhaps it would help me exorcise the ghosts of science classrooms past.

Fortunately, I elected for my dissertation to work on two writers who insist that there are better ways to learn than by starting with conclusions. In their work I discovered a methodology that was both comfortable and challenging. They offer ways of learning that value both the process and the product. They demonstrate the value of the journey undertaken with a sense of direction but with room to manoeuvre. Both practise the freedom to take detours, to backtrack, to pause and chat with fellow travellers, and simply to sit and view the landscape without worrying about making good time. Annie Dillard and Lewis Thomas suggest to me that often the journey most worth taking is the one that you construct as you go along.

It helped too that, metaphors aside, I had just made this sort of journey. The month before I set about writing my dissertation in earnest, I travelled in Ireland for a fortnight with three friends. All we knew for certain initially were the addresses of the two self-catering cottages that would be home base for each half of the

holiday. Beyond that we had a printed travel guide with appropriate suggestions in bold as to stops we might wish to consider. We also had as part of our troop a medievalist and Miltonist, healthy doses of curiosity and optimism, and keen eyes for spotting the paths strolled by locals and handwritten event notices posted on shop windows.

In retrospect this holiday became for me a model of how I wanted to spend the next year devoted largely to writing. The boundaries of where I was to travel in this next trip had been predetermined--the essays of Dillard and Thomas. I had a sense of the direction in which I wanted to start exploring but guarded against forming preconceived notions of what I would find. I knew I wanted to discover something about audience--myself and my fellow travellers. I wanted to learn how two different essayists created works of literary nonfiction and audiences to receive them. But mainly I wanted the opportunity to wander freely through the essay's wordy terrain, in Dillard's words, "to see what I could see" (Pilgrim 11).

I was prepared to accept that in the humanities where I was working things may well move forward just as Thomas describes them in his discipline: "Science is useful, indispensable sometimes, but whenever it moves forward it does so by producing a surprise; you cannot specify the surprise you'd like" (Late Night Thoughts 28). Most of all, I was hoping for surprises and the courage to confront

rather than to ignore them. I wanted to discover those things described by Thomas as "worth, as the Michelin travel guide says, a detour" (The Youngest Science 156).

One of the surprises I encountered came from David, friend of Julie, one of the women on my Ireland trip. David, as it happened, was doing a senior honour's project on constructing autobiography using Dillard as a model. When he learned that I was interested in her too, he passed on to me a piece of hers that I had not yet discovered. In a chapter called "To Fashion a Text" in William Zinsser's Inventing the Truth: the Art and Craft of Memoir, Dillard says this about her own planning and writing:

> About twelve years ago, while I was walking in Acadia National Park in Maine, I decided to write a narrative--a prose narrative, because I wanted to write prose. After a week's thought I decided to write mostly about nature, because I thought I could make it do what I wanted, and I decided to set it all on the coast of Maine. I decided further to write it in the third person, about a man, a sort of metaphysician, in his fifties. A month or so later I decided reluctantly to set the whole shebang in Virginia, because I knew more about Virginia. Then I decided to write it in the first person, as a man. Not until I had written the first chapter and showed it around--

> this was Pilgrim at Tinker Creek--did I give up the pretext of writing in the first person as a man. I wasn't out to deceive people; I just didn't like the idea of writing about myself. I knew I wasn't the subject. (57)

Finding this near the end of my own writing was very affirming. I felt in very good company, struggling to write about someone who in turn revised her plans as she went along, all the way to a Pulitzer prize. I recalled the initial outline for my project and realized what little similarity it bore to what finally emerged, how titles and groupings of texts had changed, how the project had taken on a life of its own. Initially I had envisioned working with metaphor and exploring the audience as cast by the writer into various roles including student, detective, supporting cast member, and several others that I have since forgotten. Certainly the magic number was five, neatly matching the number of chapters I anticipated writing.

Thomas too reaffirmed my decision to discover as I went along by admitting that his approach to writing often progresses in ways difficult to explain and impossible to map out fully in advance. In writing about the contemplations that led to his essays in The New England Journal of Medicine and to their second life in The Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail, he observes:

> Good bad verse was what I was pretty good at. The only other writing I'd done was scientific papers, around two hundred of them, composed in the relentlessly flat style required for absolute unambiguity in every word, hideous language as I read it today. The chance to break free of that kind of prose, and to try the essay form, raised my spirits, but at the same time worried me. I tried outlining some ideas for essays, making lists of items I'd like to cover in each piece, organizing my thoughts in orderly sequences, and wrote several dreadful essays which I could not bring myself to reread, and decided to give up being orderly. I changed the method to no method at all, picked out some suitable times late at night, usually on the weekend two days after I'd already passed the deadline, and wrote without outline or planning in advance, as fast as I could. This worked better, or at least was more fun, and I was able to get started. (The Youngest Science 242-43)

The writer of a 200-page dissertation can hardly expect to get away with "no method at all"; such luxury, if it exists, is surely limited to the talented writer of three-paged essays. Nevertheless, I took from Thomas what I considered some essential wisdom about not being afraid to

look around the corners of even the best laid plans. I took from him a willingness to follow new leads whenever they suggested themselves.

Other writers helped me in this respect too. One of the first books that I picked up from my Meaning-To-Read pile after finishing a draft of my dissertation was Cape Breton is the Thought-Control Centre of Canada. Here Ray Smith, who in the past had often entrusted me with the care of his infant son Nicholas, shared with me his conviction about literary creations: "forms should arise out of the raw chaos of the material" (11).

And in its early stages, raw chaos it was indeed. My notes consisted largely of quotations, interspersed with my own ideas that had struck me as I was reading and rereading the primary texts and all the criticism and related material I could find. (There is a whole other aside here which could be written entitled "How to do research in the midst of a University of Toronto library workers' strike"; it includes nine-hour train rides and culminates in intriguing cross-border collections of favours in the form of interlibrary loans.) Once those notes were assembled, I felt a little like the main character in David Lodge's The British Museum is Falling Down. This struggling academic maintained that if he could just get the notes in order, surely the dissertation would write itself. Wrong again.

What those notes did tell me was that there was an interrelatedness to what had caught my eye, to what seemed at first glance worth preserving. The next stage involved a variation on the old Sesame Street game and jingle, "One of these things is not like the other . . . ." I had to study the ideas to determine the relationships and identify the connections. What did all this mass of material have in common? What did not fit at all? I had started the collecting by looking in Dillard and Thomas for any mention of audience, any comments on the creative process, and any directions, overt or implied, where the writers seemed to be asking the readers to adopt a prescribed reading pose.

I found much of this and also some surprises. I kept finding myself drawn to the jokes--those places in the text where the writers used humour to keep us reading--and to those refreshingly candid passages where they admitted their errors, wrong turns, and lack of knowledge. I kept coming back too to places where the writers discussed language and writing. Together these helped me to say some things about the relationship between reader and writer in literary nonfiction.

I was conscious throughout the process that I was not doing this just for myself, that other readers would <u>have</u> to read this. In this I shared with Dillard something that Eudora Welty identified: "part of her conception of seeing is that in the act of doing it she is herself, in turn,

being seen" (4). This was a part of the process that I was perhaps most uncomfortable with as I calculated the hours of someone else's time that seeing this project to fruition would entail. I resolved that the least I could do was to produce other than the "dreadful" stuff which Thomas bemoaned producing in his earlier work. I decided to adopt as best I could but without forcing it some of the stylistic features of the writers I was working on. I decided that one of my major aims would be to make my work readable in its own right. I decided to write essays, or at least something very much like essays.

There were times, to be sure, when I wondered, in Dillard's words, "Why, why in the blue-green world write this sort of thing?" But having begun the process I contented myself with her answer, applicable too, I think, to the conventions of academic discourse: "Funny written culture, I guess; we pass things on" (Pilgrim 49). I knew in doing this that I was acting on one of my longest held beliefs--that writing is a way of coming to knowledge. Simply put, writing was the only way I knew of at this point to find out what concentrated and focused attention on selected essays had taught me.

Thomas too affirmed for me the value of jumping in and figuring things out as I went along. In speaking about alchemists, the forerunners of modern scientists, he says,

> What they did accomplish . . . was no small thing:

> they got the work going. They fiddled around in their laboratories, talked at one another incessantly, set up one crazy experiment after another, wrote endless reams of notes, which were then translated from Arabic to Greek to Latin and back again, and the work got under way. (Late Night Thoughts 31)

It was comforting too to hear from him that

> The key to a long, contented life in the laboratory is to have a chronic insoluble problem and keep working at it. But this does not mean staying out of trouble. On the contrary, it means endless, chancy experiments, one after another, done in puzzlement. It is worth it, for this is the way new things are uncovered, whether or not--and usually it turns out not--they illuminate parts of your problem. But nothing ever gets settled once and for all when you work this way. (The Youngest Science 149-50)

The realization that discovering anything for certain was not part of my mandate had long since been accepted. Anything I was going to propose could and undoubtedly would be argued. But I took comfort in Thomas's observation made in response to a particular scientific debate: "The essential lesson to be learned has nothing to do with the relative validity of the facts underlying the argument, it

is the argument itself that is the education . . . " (Late Night Thoughts 149).

Near the end of the writing of this project, I visited my alma mater in Michigan and several professors now retired who are living in the area. While sitting and sipping tea in the living room of one of them, Dr. Joyce Rochat, my reminiscing was interrupted by a question she asked. "What is the most important idea you've come across or formulated in your dissertation?" She was not serving cookies with the tea so I could not feign a full mouth in order to buy some chewing and thinking time. I looked at her blankly. She would not let it pass, however. "Pretend that I am your examining committee," she pressed. "How would you answer that question?" She was met with more silence.

I remember much about what passed between us that afternoon, but I honestly do not remember how I answered her question. I suspect that I said something about the impossibility of ever fully defining the essay and referred to its adaptability and flexibility as a genre; I undoubtedly mentioned discovering some of the multi-facetted relationships between the reader and writer that the essay calls into being. What I know for certain is that I did not answer the question to the satisfaction of either of us. In my own defence, I still had one chapter to write and a certain amount of pulling together to accomplish. I have had more time to think about her question since then and I

am more confident of what I would tell her should she ask again.

I would begin by telling her that I have learned what I am sure the members of any examining committee know from the outset, both from their own experiences of graduate study and from their interaction with many doctoral candidates: the journey itself is ultimately more valuable and informing than the destination. Mindful of Dr. Rochat's fondness for Gertrude Stein, I would assure her that I was not about to negate the value of my work by suggesting that I had arrived only to discover that there was no there there. Rather, I would admit that the destination, such as it is, was reached through what can only be described as a series of detours and surprises. I would tell her too that I look forward to revisiting and exploring more fully many of these less travelled roads, and that ultimately, in my estimation, such anticipation is the best possible testimony of a successful journeyer.

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